

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF COMEDY IN THE MODERN AGE

Edited by Louise Peacock



A CULTURAL HISTORY OF COMEDY

VOLUME 6

A Cultural History of Comedy

General Editors: Andrew McConnell Stott and Eric Weitz

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Volume 6

A Cultural History of Comedy in the Modern Age

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vii
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	ix
SERIES PREFACE	xii
Introduction	1
<i>Louise Peacock</i>	
1 Form	23
<i>Brett Mills</i>	
2 Theory	43
<i>Peter Buse</i>	
3 Praxis: 'If You Laugh at Something, Then I'll Potentially Keep It': The Praxis of Live Comedy	63
<i>Oliver Double</i>	
4 Identity: Laughs Last—Gender, Power, and Comic Identity	87
<i>Joanne Gilbert</i>	
5 The Body	111
<i>Louise Peacock</i>	
6 Politics and Power	131
<i>Chris Vognar</i>	

7	Laughter	149
	<i>Eric Weitz</i>	
8	Ethics	173
	<i>Michael Pickering</i>	
	NOTES	195
	REFERENCES	199
	INDEX	217

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

0.1	The cast of <i>Single Parents</i> , ABC, 2018.	15
0.2	The cast of <i>Saturday Night Live</i> , NBC, 2017.	17

CHAPTER THREE

3.1	Comedian Jimmy McGhie.	64
3.2	Josie Long's spidergram.	71
3.3	The Noise Next Door.	81

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1	Comedian Amy Schumer.	92
4.2	Comedian Wanda Sykes.	94
4.3	The cast of <i>The Big Bang Theory</i> , CBS, 2007–19.	99
4.4	The cast of <i>Modern Family</i> , ABC, Season 8, 2017.	105

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1	Buster Keaton in <i>The Navigator</i> , 1924.	116
5.2	Robin Williams as Mrs. Doubtfire.	124

CHAPTER EIGHT

8.1	Comedian Bernard Manning.	181
8.2	Comedian Mike Reid.	183
8.3	Comedian Stewart Lee.	186
8.4	Comedian Richard Herring.	188

CONTRIBUTORS

Peter Buse is Professor of Visual Culture and Dean of the School of the Arts at the University of Liverpool, UK. He has published widely on film, photography, psychoanalysis, and comedy, including articles in journals such as *Textual Practice*, *Parallax*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *History of Photography*, *Continuum*, *photographies*, and *Romance Quarterly*. His most recent book is *The Camera Does the Rest: How Polaroid Changed Photography* (2016).

Oliver Double is Reader in Drama at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. He is author of *Stand-Up! On Being a Comedian* (1997), *Britain had Talent: A History of Variety Theater* (2012), and *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (second edition 2014), and he is the co-editor of *Popular Performance* (2017). In 2013, he established the British Stand-Up Comedy Archive, and is the creator and co-presenter of a podcast based on the items it contains, *A History of Comedy in Several Objects*. Before becoming an academic he was a professional comedian on the British comedy circuit, a member of Red Grape Cabaret, and used to run the Last Laugh, Sheffield's longest running comedy club. He continues to explore the creative possibilities of stand-up in shows like *Saint Pancreas* (2006) and *Break a Leg* (2015), performing both locally and sometimes as far afield as Orlando, Florida.

Joanne Gilbert is the Charles A. Dana Professor of Communication at Alma College, Michigan. She is the author of *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, which has been featured on WCMU Public Television, WGVU and KZSC Public Radio, and in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Her work exploring the relationship between humor and power also appears in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Fan Girls and the Media*, *Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers*, and many other publications.

She is the Contributing Editor to *Studies in American Humor* and the recipient of numerous awards including the Lilla A. Heston Award for Outstanding scholarship in Interpretation and Performance studies from the National Communication Association.

Brett Mills is Professor of Media and Culture at the University of East Anglia, UK. He is the author of *Television Sitcom* (2005), *The Sitcom* (2009), and *Animals on Television: The Cultural Making of the Non-Human* (2017), and co-author of *Reading Media Theory* (2009, 2012) and *Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry* (2017). He was the Principal Investigator on the three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, “Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry,” and Curator of the comedy archive at the British Archive for Contemporary Writing.

Louise Peacock is an Associate Professor in Drama at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. She is the author of two books, *Serious Play—Modern Clown Performance* (2009) and *Slapstick and Comic Performance* (2014). With Oliver Double and Adam Ainsworth, she co-edited *Popular Performance* (2017). She has written numerous peer-reviewed articles and chapters on *commedia dell’arte*, stand-up comedy, and clowning.

Michael Pickering is Professor Emeritus in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Loughborough University, UK. He has published in the areas of social and cultural history, the sociology of art and culture, and media and communication studies. His most recent books include *Researching Communications* (second edition 2007), co-written with David Deacon, Peter Golding, and Graham Murdock; *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation* (2001); *Creativity, Communication and Cultural Value* (2004), co-written with Keith Negus; *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (second edition 2009), co-edited with Sharon Lockyer; *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (2008); *Research Methods for Cultural Studies* (2008); *Popular Culture*, a four-volume edited collection (2010); *The Mnemonic Imagination* (2012), co-written with Emily Keightley; *Research Methods for Memory Studies* (2013), co-edited with Emily Keightley; *Rhythms of Labour: Music at Work in Britain* (2013), co-written with Marek Korczynski and Emma Robertson; *Photography, Music and Memory* (2015) and *Memory and the Management of Change* (2017), both co-written with Emily Keightley.

Chris Vognar was the 2009 Nieman Arts and Culture Fellow at Harvard University, where he focused on connections between African American literature and pop culture. He is currently Culture Critic for the *Dallas Morning News*, where he has worked since 1996. Chris co-hosts the *Big Screen* show on the NPR affiliate KERA. He is a contributor to *Transition*, Harvard’s quarterly publication covering African and African American culture. He has taught journalism at Harvard Summer School, film history at the University of Texas

at Arlington, and arts journalism at Southern Methodist University. He earned his BA in English from UC Berkeley.

Eric Weitz is Adjunct Associate Professor of Drama and Theater Studies, Trinity College Dublin. His publications include *Theater & Laughter* (2016) and *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (2009); he is co-editor of *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theater & Performance* (2018). His recent publications also include a chapter in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor*, titled “Online and Internet Humor” (2017). He also contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (2014), *Performance Research*, the *Irish University Review*, and *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theater and Performance* (2003). He is an active member of the International Society for Humor Studies and serves on the Advisory Board of the *European Journal for Humour Research*, for which he edited a special issue on “Humour and Social Media” (2016). He sits on the boards of Smashing Times in Dublin and Collective Encounters in Liverpool, both socially engaged theater companies.

SERIES PREFACE

One of the best places to look for the deep-lying thoughts, feelings, and presumptions of a society is in its comedy. Any historical text rewards informed study for the insights into sociocultural contexts that reside sometimes invisibly in and between its lines. Texts associated with comedy and the comic go that step deeper by virtue of being built upon a generic presumption of insider status.

Umberto Eco, the writer, philosopher, and semiotician, intimated as much in a 1980 essay¹ when he pointed out that, unlike tragedy, comedy assumes a high conspiratorial stance toward the society it renders. According to Eco, the tragic journeys of, say, Orestes and Madame Bovary, may derive from societies differing to some extent from our own, but the codified injunctions regarding retribution and adultery are made eminently clear as part and parcel of their textual worlds. In comic texts, on the other hand, we encounter the fact that comedy does not always travel well, and “without a degree in classics we don’t know exactly why the Socrates of Aristophanes should make us laugh” (1995: 270). Eco concludes that, whereas tragedy will acknowledge the social rule being violated and, indeed, examine its validity, “comic works take the rule for granted, and don’t bother to restate it” (1995: 272). Building upon this principle, comedy trades on that within society which needs no introduction—it takes as given the rules and structures it breaks, varies, and usually reaffirms. A probing of the comic practices of other times and places, with a critical light shone on their assumptions by the many contributors assembled in these volumes, stands to expose considerable tensions between individuals and society. A cultural history of comedy, then, promises wide-ranging insight through the examination of both how it presents experience on the ground, and what further it reveals about what goes without saying in the everyday life beneath it.

At best comedy identifies itself only in soft focus. The six volumes of this series provide extensive evidence that there is little enough basis for generalization about comedy as to render anything one might hope to claim panoramically about it all but meaningless. Each of the volumes serves to impress how differently comedy has been defined, idealized, practiced, and received over the past few thousand years. As a proto-genre, it arose in and through Greek and Roman cultures in the crucible of the dawning European civilization we have come to call Antiquity. Its subsequent invocation as a descriptor for other types of literature and performance retains an inescapably western orientation, even though formal features associated with comedy—notably, playful or humorous registers—can be found in ancient texts from around the world. While reference to texts and thought beyond western contexts appear occasionally in these volumes, the prevailing focus remains within such frames of reference.

We have looked to organize our Cultural History of Comedy into eight themes across the six volumes, both for manageability and to suit readers pursuing circumscribed perspectives. Each volume begins with an introduction that aims to orient the reader in period and context. Three of the themes—Form, Theory, and Praxis—might appear in many a broad treatment of art as a cultural object of study, with three more—Identity, Politics and Power, and Ethics—representing its social implications and supplying lines of inquiry relevant to studies in other subjects, as well. The rooting of human experience in the Body has garnered increased attention over the past half century and more, and on several levels remains of particular interest to a vision of the world through comedy. Laughter, of course, is a theme that appears the most viable throughline for comedy, all but definitive of the transaction between comic text and spectator/reader.

The corpus of comedy-related thought and practice is sprawling and ever-expanding, and so, to some extent, each of the contributors has customized an approach to the theme according to their scholarly spheres. We have, in any case, tried to ensure that the fifty-four essays contained in these volumes (eight themed essays plus an introduction in each one) offer themselves accessibly to more than a strictly academic readership. In fact, you will find herein a range of orientations and writing styles not limited to any given band of conventional scholarly approach. Whatever the cause or nature of any given reader's interest, there are intriguing and, indeed, revealing times ahead within the pages of this and the other volumes.

Andrew McConnell Stott and Eric Weitz, General Editors

Introduction

LOUISE PEACOCK

The period covered by this volume was marked by an explosion of comic forms. Prior to 1920, the main forms of comedy had been novels, plays, and early silent film. While these continued post 1920, the performative developments in the early part of the twentieth century were most clearly rooted in vaudeville and music hall. In addition, comedy was more widely disseminated and developed by technical innovation. As this period opens, silent films were flourishing and many of the significant names (Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Fatty Arbuckle, and Stan Laurel) began their careers and honed their skills on the vaudeville stage. The introduction of sound in the late 1920s increased the range of film comedy; from that point in time, we can trace a long and varied path of comedy through film history. Other influential developments in this period include radio and television with their sitcoms, sketch shows, quizcoms, and mockumentaries; live comedy in the form of stand-up and improv, and digital media. The emergence of digital memes from 1997 onwards, Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, and Vine in 2012 signals the importance of social media as a method of dissemination for new short forms of comedy. Similarly, the arrival of various streaming services such as Netflix (1997), Hulu (2007), and Amazon (which entered the streaming market in 2013) has changed the ways in which comedy is produced and viewed.

This evolution in patterns of the creation and dissemination of comedy, together with shifting perceptions regarding social, moral, and ethical acceptability, has necessarily brought about changes in the way comedy is viewed and the range of responses it provokes. In the early part of the period covered here, viewing comedy was a communal experience whether in the vaudeville theater or the cinema. For example, as stand-up comedy became

established as a form, its primary mode of performance was live. If you wanted to see a comedian, then you went to a comedy club. Some leading names in stand-up comedy released LPs of their performances so that audiences could enjoy the set over and over, but this was not the primary mode of intended reception.

Whilst comedy clubs still exist as a site of comedy performance, the majority of individuals who experience stand-up comedy do so in a mediatized form. Whilst some forms of comedy such as stand-up comedy, improv, films, and television still work through a communal and sometimes live showing, many other forms of comedy are presented in a way that has shifted from a primarily communal experience to one that is more socially fractured. When we click on a link on Facebook or Twitter, we tend to do so alone even though we may subsequently share the experience in some way by tagging the video or retweeting the link. Shifts in the way television is produced and delivered also contribute to changes in the way that comedy is consumed domestically. Prior to the advent of video recorders, which became popular gadgets in homes from the mid-1980s, viewers watched programs on the day and at the time that they were scheduled. Those programs would then be discussed (and jokes retold) the next day at work and school. VCRs loosened that viewing tightness and it was loosened still further by the explosion of channels when cable and satellite television became more common (an event that occurred at different times in the USA and the UK). Today's "On Demand" viewing (on, for example, BBC iPlayer, ITV Hub, and Channel 4 OD, as well as on-demand services on US cable providers) and streaming platforms like Hulu, Amazon, and Netflix have shifted viewing patterns still further because viewers can connect with a series years after its first release, with "binge" watching now common. All of this dilutes the impact of a show or performance by spreading the audience reception across days, weeks, and even years, during which topical relevance may be lost and perceptions may alter.

Just as comic forms have proliferated and changed, so have attitudes as to what comedy can and cannot do, with the debate currently extending to what comedy should and should not do. In the early years of the period covered by this volume, comedy was created primarily for entertainment and little, if any attention, was paid to the idea that comedy might intersect with issues of morality, despite the myriad ways in which comedies in earlier periods (for example, in both Greek theater and the theater of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods) had offered social or political comment. For example, most silent comedies do not make any attempt to comment on the political circumstances of the time in which they were created. By 1940, in response to the Second World War, Chaplin wrote and directed *The Great Dictator* as a direct response to global politics. Its final speech (which was much maligned by critics) is Chaplin's attempt to make a statement to his audience about their personal

responsibilities in combating Hitler and fascism. Since then, many performers and writers across all the media now available for comic production have used their platforms to comment on social and political matters. Whilst there are of course comic products that still offer entertainment without social or political comedy, this is definitely a period in which shifting attitudes on a range of topics including race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, religion, and politics have complicated both the production of comedy and the reception of it. This volume covers a 100-year period that has, arguably, seen the greatest changes in social and political opinions. It is a period that has seen laws governing discrimination introduced around the world. At the beginning of this period, neither the UK nor USA had laws that protected against discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexuality, race, disability, or religion. It has a significant bearing on the difference in what was deemed acceptable in comic content at various points in the 100 years covered by this volume.

Alongside this explosion of form came developments in Theory, dealt with in Chapter 2, which connected comedy to a range of academic disciplines now interested in considering the role and impact of comedy on our culture: philosophy, psychology, linguistics, sociology, film and cinema studies, television studies, theater and performance. This is also a period during which there has been significant discussion about the purpose and responsibility of comedy. The notion of comedy giving offense or comedy audiences taking offense or being outraged has gained traction alongside the concept of political correctness. Michael Pickering considers the relationship between comedy and ethics in Chapter 8, whilst in Chapters 4 and 6 Joanne Gilbert and Chris Vognar, respectively, explore the ways comedy can provide an arena for an exploration of identity and power.

FORM

More than any other period, the almost 100 years since 1920 has seen a proliferation of comic forms. In order to consider the way that comedy has developed in terms of both delivery and reception, this introduction will first offer a survey of the snowballing of comic forms during this period. This growth is not, of course, a simple linear path. The development of various forms overlapped and fed into each other. Consider the connections between radio and early television. The period opens with live comedy in the theater and musical hall and silent comedy on film. By the end of the period, live comedy has proliferated in form; silent comedy has been joined by sound comedy; radio and television are firmly established (each with a range of comic forms) and the influence of the internet on comedy must also be taken into account. It will be necessary to consider the development of radio comedy and the way the emergence of forms such as sketch shows, sitcoms, and quizcoms

also influenced the development of comedy on television. In addition, theater has consistently offered comic plays which offer us an escape from society or a commentary on it. Finally, in terms of media, the internet has evolved its own forms of comedy influenced by its methods of dissemination and by its target audience.

Vaudeville predates the period covered by this volume, existing from the 1870s (and can even be traced back to the beginnings of variety at the Lafayette Theater in New York in 1827) but, according to Arthur Wertheim, it experienced “its zenith from approximately 1890–1920” (2006: xvii). Before that demise began, vaudeville (in America) and music hall (in the UK) were places in which audiences could enjoy comedy acts. Music hall’s history was similar to that of vaudeville. Just as vaudeville developed from variety, so music hall developed from the music rooms attached to saloon bars, but by the 1850s purpose-built venues began to appear. By the end of the 1890s, shows contained up to twenty acts and could last as long as four hours with star performers travelling around London to perform in more than one venue per night. In both the US and the UK, only some of these acts focused on comedy, alongside singers, dancers, acrobats, gymnasts, and animal acts. However, despite the one-time popular appeal of such acts, by the time the period covered by this volume begins, both vaudeville and music hall were on the wane.

This decline in popularity can be attributed to a number of causes, including the rise in film comedy that occurred over roughly the same period: “As early as 1910, more customers were going to the movies rather than attending a vaudeville show” (Wertheim 2006: 254). Wertheim also identifies other opportunities that drained talent from vaudeville, including Broadway, revues, cabaret shows, and radio. The arrival of synchronized sound in *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Alan Crosland) in 1927 was another significant blow to vaudeville. Both movies and radio entered a period of massive expansion in the 1920s. In 1921, there were only five radio stations in the US, but by 1927 that number had grown to 681. In 1910, D. W. Griffith directed the first film to be shot in Hollywood, *In Old California*. By 1928, there were eight significant studios in Hollywood, all producing comedies as part of their output. In the 1920s, there were an average of 800 films released each year, making it the period that saw the greatest output of feature films in US history.

EARLY FILM

Early film offered the first powerful example of the influence of technical developments on comic performance, production, and reception. Vaudeville can be seen as a direct influence on both early film and radio, with many performers moving from vaudeville into either film or radio performance. One useful example of such a transfer is provided by Buster Keaton, who is a perfect

bridge between vaudeville and the beginning of the era of film. He developed and practiced his physical comedy skills in a vaudeville act with his parents “fast gaining fame as the roughest roughhousing in vaudeville” (McPherson 2007: 332). His films come to represent a stunning combination of the physical and the technological, in keeping with the spirit of the first half of the period covered by this book. The word “spectacular” could now be applied to comic performance. Even now performers experiment with what technology offers to comedy just as Keaton did when he duplicated himself eight times over in *The Playhouse* (1921), walked into the film screen in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), and set fire to a bridge in *The General* (1926), all of which he had a hand in directing. Comedy is about progress, about pushing boundaries and seeing how existing forms can be reshaped and how new forms can be invented. In Keaton’s films, physical slapstick and the possibilities offered by cinematic techniques represent what Alan Bilton, following Gilbert Seldes, defines as “the purest form of cinematic art: bodies in motion, animated matter, the spatial ‘shock’ of fast editing and impossibly accelerated action” (2013: 35).

Each comic form has to find a new way to represent and engage the age in which it will be viewed, and for silent film comedy that meant openly addressing issues of mechanization. Both Chaplin and Keaton created films that focused on the interaction between man and machine. In *Modern Times* (1936), Chaplin explicitly addresses the impact of industrialization on man as the Little Tramp character struggles to keep up with the production line and is ultimately swallowed by the machine. Indeed, as Michael North suggests, the sequence can also be interpreted as a commentary on the way the film industry swallowed Chaplin: “when the beltway gobbles him up, it seems the epitome of every camera Chaplin ever faced, stealing his visage and stamping it as an image on the film” (2009: 187). Chaplin resists technology, just as he resisted the advent of sound, whereas Keaton appears to have been fascinated by the possibilities that technology offered. In *The General* (1926), Keaton relished the opportunities presented by filming from the trains and used the spectacle of the bridge blowing up as a climactic moment in the film. Even when Keaton’s body is central to the comedy as in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), he is still alive to the possibilities offered by set construction and special effects, whereas the comedy of the majority of Chaplin’s films could be argued to be primarily theatrical, arising from very human circumstances. Laughter is provoked by Chaplin stumbling, tripping and falling, and by the human (often sentimental) connection between the characters.

The introduction of sound created new possibilities for comedy on film. More complex plots could now be carried by the use of dialog and narration. In *The Great Dictator* (1940), whilst there are strong sequences of physical comedy, the film ends with a now famous speech in which Chaplin addresses the need for peace in the world. Though this isn’t the first film to move beyond entertainment,

it is a useful indicator of a shift away from pure entertainment. That is not to suggest that all films seek to educate or influence their audiences but as the period under consideration progresses, film comedy fulfills a range of purposes and one of those is certainly to address contemporary politics. A line can be traced throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century from *The Great Dictator* through to *The Death of Stalin* (dir. Armando Iannucci 2017) by way of *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (dir. Stanley Kubrick 1964), *The Candidate* (dir. Michael Ritchie 1972), and *In the Loop* (dir. Armando Iannucci 2009). Chris Vognar explores the latter two in some detail in Chapter 6. Each of these films recognizes the potential of comedy to comment on current events and to use laughter as a means to communicate a political message. At times, these films may cause offense or even outrage, leading to personal difficulties for the film-makers or to political ramifications on the international stage. The final speech at the end of *The Great Dictator* contributed to the case the FBI was building against Chaplin as a communist but a greater and more dangerous response came from North Korea in response to the 2014 film *The Interview* (dir. Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg). In the film, James Franco and Seth Rogen played a television interviewer and his producer who interview a Korean dictator who looked remarkably like Kim Jong-un. The BBC reported Korea's response to the potential release of the film as follows: "North Korea has promised 'merciless' retaliation if a forthcoming Hollywood movie about killing Kim Jong-un is released, say agencies" (BBC News 2018). It is worth noting that the film was released and no merciless retaliation followed. Still the example shows that political comedy can provoke dangerous responses. We will return to this issue later in the Introduction when we consider the ability of comedy to provoke outrage and offense in ways that can lead to direct and sometimes fatal responses. Such issues are also more fully explored by Michael Pickering in Chapter 8 on ethics.

Not all film comedies are so socially or politically challenging. Again and again in the films of Chaplin and Keaton we watch them meet a girl, fall for her, struggle to overcome some obstacle before happily getting together. Love remains a primary concern of comedy throughout this period and beyond silent film two key developments occurred. Frank Capra's 1934 film *It Happened One Night* is often regarded as the first romantic comedy or romcom. The introduction of dialog allowed for the development of a more complex story, one in which wit played as large a part in provoking laughter as physical comedy. Released during the Depression era in the US, this "romcom," like many that followed it, offered hope of happiness that was not connected to material wealth. In filmic terms, the next comic development was the screwball comedy. Wes Gehring offers the most comprehensive analysis of the difference between these two forms in *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy* (2002). He suggests that "screwball comedy represents America's distinctive take on farce—

accenting broad physical comedy and ludicrous events,” whereas romantic comedy “is more reality-based, with little or no slapstick” (2002: 1). Whatever their structural differences, both forms present stories in which, eventually, everything comes out right romance-wise, offering audiences light relief from the trials of their everyday lives.

Offering lower risks but plenty of laughs are the spoof movies, which take any easily recognizable genre of film and parody their conventions. In *Horror Spoofs of Abbott and Costello*, Jeffrey Miller distinguishes between horror parodies and horror spoofs, suggesting that “a horror parody mocks all the conventions of the horror genre . . . [but] it is played strictly for laughs” (2004: 2). On the other hand, he regards spoofs as films that are comedies but comedies which contain horror sequences which are played for real. In *Parody as Film Genre: Never Give a Saga an Even Break*, Wes Gehring declares that “Normally the terms *parody* and *spoofing* are used interchangeably” (1999: 23, italics in original) and despite Miller’s attempt at distinction, it seems that in the literature around film parody and spoofs the two terms are largely interchangeable, with each relying on the viewer’s knowledge of the conventions of the original in order to process the ways in which those conventions are lampooned. Abbott and Costello made a number of movies that spoofed the horror film genre. These films were in the Abbott and Costello Meet the Monsters Series and include the duo meeting Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Invisible Man, and the Mummy. More recently, the *Scary Movie* franchise spoofs Wes Craven’s horror film *Scream* (2000). Of course, other genres with clear conventions can be spoofed and there are spoofs of the western genre, most famously *Blazing Saddles* (dir. Mel Brooks 1974). Other examples include *Three Amigos* (dir. John Landis 1986), *City Slickers* (dir. Ron Underwood 1991), *Shanghai Noon* (dir. Tom Dey 2000), and *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (dir. Seth MacFarlane 2014). Also, disaster movies (*Airplane!*, dir. Jim Abrahams 1980; *Disaster Movie*, dir. Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer 2008), police films (*Hot Fuzz*, dir. Edgar Wright 2007), spy films (the Austin Powers and Johnny English franchises), and action/adventure films (*Hot Shots*, dir. Jim Abrahams 1991; *Get Smart*, dir. Peter Segal 2008) have been amply spoofed over the years, tending to be prevalent in or just after an era in which the original form is highly popular.

Spoofs and parodies rely heavily on the comic techniques of exaggeration and absurdity. With each of these an aspect of the original genre is taken and heightened to the point of ridiculousness. *Airplane!*, for example, exaggerates the food poisoning on board until there is only one person left who might have the skills to land the plane safely. His own physical reactions are exaggerated with special effects so that he is shown dripping wet from nervous sweat, his fear comically justified by exaggerated thunder and lightning effects. The film is also well known for ridiculous verbal jokes:

DR. RUMACK This woman has to be gotten to a hospital.

ELAINE A hospital? What is it?

DR. RUMACK It's a big building with patients but that's not important right now.

The joke is one of a sequence of jokes that offer literal responses to one way in which the question could be interpreted, but which an audience recognizes as a form of miscommunication. Exaggeration, absurdity, and miscommunication will be encountered time and again across all the media considered here. Whilst techniques may have remained constant, the content of jokes and comic plots is ever-changing in response to social changes in relation to the acceptability of prejudice as an appropriate topic for humor. This will be considered more fully later and is also dealt with in Chapter 8.

The mockumentary form overlaps with parody because a mockumentary is often based on spoofing the existing documentary format. The significant difference is that the world parodied is actual rather than fictional. We saw earlier how a western spoof parodies the conventions of a western. Whilst it is possible that an unwitting viewer might take a spoof western as an actual western, they will still understand they are watching a fictional creation. Viewers of *This is Spinal Tap* (dir. Rob Reiner 1984) may not have been certain that what they were watching was mocking the form of rock documentaries: they may have taken it as an actual documentary. Jennie Yabroff, writing for *Newsweek* in 2009, asserts that “when ‘This Is Spinal Tap’ premiered in 1984, audiences thought it was a straightforward rock documentary about a real band.” The danger with mockumentaries is that they can be misunderstood (as can much satire). Even when the form is understood, a mockumentary can cause offense in the same way that a satire might (as we saw earlier with *The Interview*). When such offense is caused, it affects the way the audience reads the film. For example, according to Cultural Studies scholar Miranda Campbell, Sacha Baron-Cohen’s *Borat* (dir. Larry Charles 2006) caused such controversy prior to its release that the audience “are rewarded for our cultural knowledge of what the mockumentary sets out to do even if we have not had to exert ourselves to detect where the line between fact and fiction has been drawn” (Campbell 2007: 54). Despite the opening of the film’s use of grainy footage suggesting that the film has been made by the Kazakhstan Ministry of Information, audience members already knew that the film was a fictional creation.

THEATER

During the first half of the twentieth century, film-makers explored the possibilities offered by this new and rapidly developing medium, but throughout the period comedy continued to be written and produced in the theater. Just as

film comedy could be seen as both providing relief from everyday life and engaging in social and political issues, so too could theater. The theatrical tradition of comedy is, of course, centuries older than that of film and preceding volumes in this series have dealt more fully with theater than there is space to do here.

In the early part of the twentieth century, British theatrical comedy was dominated by farce and by the comedy of manners. Farce has much in common with the distraction from everyday life provided by silent slapstick. Whilst there may be verbal jokes in farce, much of the comedy derives from exaggerated characters in ludicrous situations, often involving disguise, concealment, and coincidence. It offers the audience a vicarious experience outside social convention, which is, nevertheless, terminated at the end of the play with the reassertion of social mores. This form of entertainment was hugely popular in the UK from the Aldwych farces (1923–33) written by Ben Travers, through the Whitehall farces (1954–66) under the creative leadership of Brian Rix, to farce across the West End from the 1970s to the present with perhaps Ray Cooney the most significant writer. Often these farces revolve around infidelity and the threat of being caught in the wrong place or with the wrong person. They do not reflect society as most of the audience would experience it, but they provide an evening's entertainment in which those watching can be entertained by trials and tribulations that are unlikely to occur in their own lives.

On the other hand, a comedy of manners does seek to reflect society and to comment on some aspect that the author believes to be undesirable or in need of improvement. The plays of Noel Coward, for example, give us cast after cast of upper middle-class characters whose behavior is in some way reprehensible. Comedy-of-manners plays are ascendant in periods in which style is central to the way society functions. They rely on sophisticated wit as the main carrier of comedy, commenting on the behavior of the characters and critiquing the society that finds such behavior acceptable. Consider the balcony scene from *Private Lives*. We see two couples each on the first night of their honeymoon. It is clear that the couples are mismatched. Amanda and Elyot have been married to each other but are now married to much calmer individuals who are clearly worthy but too boring for them. The scene revolves around verbal quips which reveal Sybil and Elyot to be far too sharp for their respective partners. The audience can hardly be surprised when they run away together. The play offers a commentary on its society's expectations of men, women, and marriage. A wide range of theatrical comedy has developed since the Second World War, building on existing forms and responding to shifts in social mores. Whilst farces continue to be written by such playwrights as Alan Ayckbourn (*Bedroom Farce* 1975; *A Small Family Business* 1987; and *How the Other Half Loves* 2015), Michael Frayn (*Noises Off!* 1982), Richard Bean (*In the Club* 2009), and James Graham (*The Culture* 2018) in the UK, and by Larry Shue (*The Nerd*

1981) and Ken Ludwig (*Lend Me a Tenor* 1986) in the US, it does appear to be a comic genre in decline. Theatrical comedy from the 1980s onwards demonstrates a tendency to merge comedy with drama or tragedy. It is hard to define whether this is a response to the fact that the territory for comedy as pure entertainment is occupied so fully by televisual forms that theatrical comedy must offer something different, or whether it is a response from playwrights to the world in which they are living.

RADIO

Early radio owed as much to vaudeville as did film, and from those early vaudeville stars' forays into radio came comic forms that would remain constant in radio for decades and that would subsequently influence the development of comic forms on television. One significant example of this was the radio show that began as *Sam 'n' Henry* in 1926 and which went on to become *Amos 'n' Andy* on radio in 1928 and on television in 1951. This show offered listeners the experience of following events in the lives of two African American men, Amos and Andy. Initially, it ran as a daily show with episodes lasting ten minutes. In 1943, it became a weekly show with longer thirty-minute episodes. The focus on two characters, dealing with their day-to-day lives and extracting comedy from their reactions to each other and with the world around them, would form the basis on what came to be known as the sitcom. There are contemporary variations on the form, and they will be dealt with later in the Introduction. For a fuller consideration of sitcoms, readers can turn to Chapter 1.

Also, according to Erik Barnouw, "As 1933 began, the networks were experiencing a vaudeville boom. The collapse of vaudeville and the slump in the theater had brought to radio a barrage of comedy and variety programs which now dominated the schedule" (1966: 273). Variety shows, unlike the fledgling sitcom form, did not rely on a constant cast of characters but instead replicated an evening of vaudeville over the airways. Listeners were entertained primarily by comedians and singers whose acts could be sustained and enjoyed without the need for visual input.

In the US, the flowering of comedy on radio was explosive but relatively short-lived. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, a range of comedy shows became established, including sketch shows, comedy game shows, and sitcoms. Red Skelton's *The Raleigh Cigarette Program* was a sketch show that revolved around a range of characters created by Skelton. Two popular games shows, *Stop Me If You've Heard This One* (1939–40) and *Can You Top This?* (1940–58), encouraged listeners to send in jokes which either had to be completed by the comedians on the panel or measured in terms of audience response to identify a winner. An early sitcom was *Fibber McGee and Molly*, which ran from 1939 to 1955 and which centered around Fibber (a teller of outlandish tales) and

Molly, his long-suffering wife. Supplemented by a cast of additional characters, the program developed a number of running gags and this particular comic device would be used in a range of comic forms on both radio and television.

Another important serialized comedy drama was *The Goldbergs*, which was significant because it was one of the earliest entertainment shows to accurately depict what it meant to be Jewish in America. At this early stage in the history of radio comedy, one key function of comedy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be identified: to educate the listening public and to normalize experiences beyond those of white Americans. The advent of television pretty much stopped the development of radio comedy in its tracks (and the only contemporary stations devoted to comedy are on satellite services such as *Jeff and Larry's Comedy Round Up* and *Comedy Central Radio*—both available on Sirius XFM).

In the US, therefore, it is necessary to turn to television to consider how comic forms developed from the 1950s onwards. The situation was rather different in the UK where comedy sustains a wider-ranging presence on BBC Radio. The roots of British radio comedy can be traced back to *It's That Man Again!*, which aired from 1939 to 1949. It was followed by a wealth of shows in a range of formats, including sketch shows, sitcoms, satirical news shows, and comedy panel games. *ITMA* was an early comedy sketch show and it was followed by *The Goon Show* (1951–8), *Round the Horne* (1965–8), *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again* (1964–89), and *Little Britain* (2000–2). Sometimes, *The Goon Show* is classified as a sitcom but its format, plot, and characters were so surreal that it hardly fits the traditional sitcom model, which became established in the early 1950s by shows such as *Life with the Lyons* (1950–61) and the more famous *Hancock's Half Hour* (1954–9). A rich tradition of radio sitcom stems from these early shows, the shapes and structures of which created a template that would soon be adopted by television as the new medium sought to create its own comedy programming. Another strand of comic programming developed around the notion of the quiz or game show. Programs in this tradition include the long-running *Just a Minute* (1967–), *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (1988–), and *The Now Show* (1998–). Necessarily this list is indicative rather than exhaustive but the range of styles of comedy shows on the radio prefigured what would happen on television, with many British radio programs making the transition to television. However, in the UK when radio shows transferred to television, new shows took their place and so the British listening public did not experience the falling away of radio comedy that took place in the US.

TELEVISION

Whilst experimental television broadcasts began as early as 1928 in the US, commercial broadcasting did not take off until 1939 and development was

brought to a rapid halt by the Second World War. After the war in 1946, the US had six stations on air and two expanding networks, NBC and CBS. Within two years there were six networks, broadcasting 128 stations, seven days a week in a primetime slot which ran from 8pm to 11pm. This rapid expansion was an indicator of the central position television would come to hold in American households and therefore in American society. It was the beginning of a development that would allow American television to become a global force, spreading American culture around the world. In the UK, the BBC began broadcasting in the London area in 1936. As in the US, the development of television was stalled by the war. The BBC shut down on September 1, 1939, and did not air again until June 7, 1946. Proliferation in the UK happened at a much slower rate than in the US (perhaps as a consequence of the geographical differences of the two countries). The British public did not have the choice of a different station until the arrival of ITV in 1955 and they waited nine more years before BBC 2 was launched. The US rapidly switched from terrestrial television to cable television (largely as a response to geographical challenges) so that by 1952 there were seventy cable systems in the US, rising to 800 by 1962. In 1975, Home Box Office (HBO) was launched, a significant moment because the channel was unregulated, allowing it to show programming, such as George Carlin's stand-up comedy, which would not have found a home on the other networks.

Since its inception, there has been disagreement over the role and status of television in society, both in the US and in the UK. In the latter, Lord Reith, the first Director General of the BBC, expected television to educate and entertain. On the other hand, the funding of commercial television, most significantly in the US, demanded some adherence to the wishes of the advertisers who were a main source of revenue. These considerations have affected the development and programming of comedy in each country. Whilst it is true that the Reithian model relaxed somewhat in the 1960s as social values shifted, the power of advertisers continues to exert influence.

Early television programming followed the same forms that had been established on radio with an early emphasis on sitcoms and sketch shows. The world's first sitcom offering was *Pinwright's Progress*, which ran for ten episodes in 1946–7 on the BBC. The titular character ran a store and the sitcom explored his difficulties with a hated rival. The first US sitcom was *Mary Kay and Johnny*, which was broadcast by Du Mont. The show focused on the life of the titular newlyweds. Both these shows set precedents in which sitcoms developed as harmless entertainment, reflecting no social issues. Both countries also saw popular radio sitcoms transfer to television, a path of development that remains constant in the UK to this day. When *Amos 'n' Andy* transferred to television in 1950, Correll and Gosden—the white performers who had originated the show and who had performed it in “black voice”—realized that “presenting a

straightforward adaptation of their radio series, featuring themselves in blackface, would be unacceptable” (McLeod 2005: 147). This, at least, demonstrates a budding awareness that depictions of black characters by white performers was becoming socially less acceptable, even in comedy.¹

Later shows would challenge the idea that sitcoms could only offer entertainment and would begin to include an element of awareness-raising or even challenging of the status quo. Just as the radio version of *The Goldbergs* had depicted the life of a Jewish American family, so too did the television version which aired from 1949 to 1957. Other shows presented African American characters and eventually families. In their chapter, “The Hidden Truths in Contemporary Black Sitcoms,” Robin Coleman, Charlton McIlwain, and Jessica Moore Matthews outline four periods of development in the representation of African Americans in sitcoms, moving from using stereotypes as the target of the joke through to more recent sitcoms in which they suggest, “Blackness is at the core of the cultural discourse and is a socio-cultural experience against which all else is marked” (2016: 133).

Sitcom is a form that demonstrates both a firm adherence to tradition and a desire to innovate. Traditional sitcoms focused on family or friendship groups relied heavily on stereotypes and usually segregated the races. More innovative sitcoms began to appear, particularly in the US, which focused on relationships and issues long considered taboo. These connect with what Coleman et al. have identified as a key element of sitcom humor, that it “relies upon, and is in response to, issues and problems found within the social structure” (2016: 4). In its original incarnation, which ran from 1998–2006, *Will and Grace* was presenting something innovative through its focus on the sexuality of its primary characters. According to Lesbian and Gay Studies scholar Karen Quimby, “Will and Grace represent two people who are navigating their way through a relationship that has no prescribed model in our culture. In this sense, they (or the scriptwriters) are inventing the shape and trajectory of their ‘in-between’ relationship as they go” (2005: 714). Here we can see a sitcom responding to present social concerns and seeking to explore relationships and the language connected with them in ways that may have been unfamiliar to many of its viewers. By centralizing gay characters on a mainstream network, the creators of the show may be providing the opportunity for viewers to be confronted and positively influenced by ways of life of which they have no or little knowledge. Communication scholars Edward Schiappa, Peter Gregg, and Dean Hewes define this as parasocial contact and their research suggests that “Viewers perceive the portrayal of the gay characters on *Will & Grace* as positive. Both viewing frequency and parasocial interaction predict lower levels of sexual prejudice toward gay men” (2006: 31).

This type of example indicates that sitcoms can do far more than entertain their audiences. Positive representation of minority groups may have an impact

on viewers' perceptions of individuals from marginalized groups with whom they may not have much contact. This, of course, also indicates why it is so important that sitcoms do not rely on lazy stereotypes when depicting minority communities because those depictions may be seen by audiences and taken as an acceptable way of viewing others different from them. For example, the British sitcom *Mind Your Language* (1977–86) was set in an evening class for immigrants learning English. A range of nationalities were depicted via broad stereotypes highlighted by both costume and exaggerated accent. What this show did was to reduce, for example, Indians, to simplified exaggeration, which, far from creating a positive understanding of that community may well have led to a negative, racist response. During the twelve years between the end of *Mind Your Language* and the beginning of *Will and Grace*, it seems that comedy was engaged in a two-way relationship with societal perception and representation of minority groups. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, social sensitivity had not developed to the point where there were sustained serious criticisms of the use of broadly racist stereotypes in comedy.

A development since the millennium has been that characters and therefore casting have become increasingly diverse. In the autumn 2018 television season in the US, a number of the new sitcoms were remarkable for the diversity of their casting. For example, ABC's *Single Parents*, which premiered in 2018, has a core cast of five adults and five children (plus a baby). Of the five adults, two are white, one is Jewish, one is African American, and one is Korean. The children reflect the races of their parents. As a hangout sitcom,² *Single Parents* is able to combine a range of ethnicities in a way that might be challenging in a family-centered sitcom.

Single Parents is indicative of a growing attention to ethnic casting, which has been on the rise since 2015. In many ways, this sitcom appears to be aspirational, reflecting a liberal view that friendships can be forged across racial and ethnic boundaries. In other recent sitcoms such as *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015–) and *Blackish* (2014–), particular ethnic groups are well represented. The first of these sitcoms focuses on the lives of the Huang family who live in Florida but who are originally from Taiwan. The show debuted in 2015 and its fifth series began on October 5, 2018. In addition to the Huang family there are series regulars, their neighbors and Lewis's co-worker who are white, but the emphasis, particularly in early series, was on the difficulties the various family members had in integrating. In this way, the show explicitly addresses social issues of integration through a comic lens. It would be easy to argue that this show, only the second sitcom³ to focus on an Asian-American family, offers an educative representation of Taiwanese-Americans but it is also easy to level a charge of segregation against it. Similar accusations could be made about *Blackish*, which also airs on ABC and which also debuted in 2015. This show focuses on the Johnson family and explores issues around their cultural



FIGURE 0.1: Kimrie Lewis, Leighton Meester, Brad Garrett, Taran Killam, and Jake Choi of ABC's *Single Parents* pose for a portrait during the 2018 Summer Television Critics Association Press Tour at The Beverly Hilton Hotel on August 7, 2018 in Beverly Hills, California. Photo by Benjo Arwas / Getty Images.

identification as African Americans because the father is worried that his family has turned its back on their roots and become “less black” in the process. Whilst the show addresses a number of racial stereotypes head on, it does so by presenting a core black cast rather than representing a racially diverse population. In some ways, this show has not moved far from the way UK sitcom *Desmond's* (1989–94) and US sitcom *The Cosby Show* (1984–92) worked. Whilst it is tempting to see the diversity of *Single Parents* as a beacon of hope, it is important to remember that the sitcom is a traditional form of comedy and the shows that challenge traditions are few and far between.

Early sketch shows appeared to be much more ready to be innovative. Sketch shows established a structure in which a series of sketches with no narrative connection were placed together to create a program. Each sketch usually involves several performers and might last anywhere from one to ten minutes. In the UK, the transition of sketches out of vaudeville and into a form of entertainment in their own right was aided by the activities of the Cambridge Footlights Society, which staged revue shows each year such as *Beyond the Fringe* (conceived by Jonathan Miller, Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, and Dudley Moore in 1960) and *A Clump of Plinths* (1963). Many of the same performers

and writers were subsequently involved in establishing sketch shows on both radio and television

From the early 1960s in the UK, the creation of comedy, particularly sketch comedy and stand-up, became more and more influenced by university graduates rather than by comedians who had risen through the ranks of entertainment venues such as the music hall and working men's clubs. This shift in the education and life experience of the creators of comedy contributed to the rise in social and political satire and the rejection of socially stereotyped humor including mother-in-law jokes and racist humor.

Whilst sketch shows were initially innovative and particular shows such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* experimented with the structure of how sketches might transition or be connected, it is certainly the case that sketch shows in both the UK and the US quickly settled into a pattern in which certain ingredients could be expected. These elements included recurring characters, running jokes, cross-dressing, parody, and comic songs. This effectively became a formula and these ingredients can now be detected in all sketch shows.

Often a sketch show will make no attempt to address social or political issues but will concentrate on providing escapism and entertainment. Very few, if any, of the Python sketches connected with everyday events because they relied so heavily on absurdity. There is, however, a strong tradition of social and political satire in British sketch shows. The satirical puppet sketch show *Spitting Image*, which ran from 1984 to 1996, targeted politicians, the Royal Family, and celebrities from the world of sports and entertainment. Another show that focused on social satire with particular attention to race and ethnicity was *Goodness Gracious Me*. This show, which ran from 1996 to 1998, explored British-Asian culture, in particular targeting the patronizing behavior of many white people toward South Asian traditions and individuals. For example, one sketch "Going for an English" lampooned the behavior of white Britons going to Indian restaurants, ordering far too much food, including the hottest thing on the menu. In "Going for an English," the cast of four British Indian actors go for a meal in an English restaurant where their order is taken by a white waiter. They order too many dishes, argue with each other about which dishes go together, and they look for the blandest thing on the menu.

A similar mix of sketch shows for entertainment and sketch shows with a satirical purpose exists in the US. One early American sketch show was *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In*, which aired from 1968 to 1973. Laurence Maslon defined its humor as being "on a burlesque level, updated with candy colored psychedelia" (2008: 98). Arguably the most significant sketch show in the US is *Saturday Night Live*, which first aired on October 11, 1975. For many years the majority white cast created sketches that commented on society, popular culture, and politics. Whilst the original cast did have one African American performer, Garrett Morris, the show has been slow to adopt diverse casting. In



FIGURE 0.2: Lorne Michaels (C) with cast and crew accepts the Outstanding Variety Sketch Series award for *Saturday Night Live* onstage during the seventieth Emmy Awards on September 17, 2017 in Los Angeles, California. Photo by Neilson Barnard / FilmMagic.

1998, Horatio Sanz became *SNL*'s first Latino cast member, followed by the first Latina, Melissa Villaseñor, eighteen years later. In September 2019 *SNL* cast their first full time Asian American cast member, Bowen Yang.

Without a diverse cast, the show's ability to comment on contemporary society is reduced. As Joanna Robinson identified in an article for *Vanity Fair* in early 2017, "When the show diversifies its cast, it's better able to provide piercing social commentary. This has been especially true since *SNL* added Zamata, Leslie Jones, and Michael Che just a few years ago. Sketches on issues like #OscarsSoWhite or the racial tensions of the 2016 election wouldn't have been possible without them in the cast" (Robinson 2017). There have, of course been sketch shows such as *Chappelle's Show* (2003–6) and *Key & Peele* (2012–15), which engage head on with issues of race, addressing the racial tensions existing in contemporary America.

In the area of live performance both the US and the UK have a strong stand-up comedy scene, relatively unimpeded by the commercial and political pressures asserted by the mainstream broadcast media. The work of Richard Zoglin (2008), Oliver Double (1997, 2014), and Kliph Nesteroff (2016) provides an overview of the development of stand-up comedy that negates the need for one

here. However, what is important to stress is what Mintz defines as stand-up comedy's ability to confront "just about all the important aspects of our culture and our society, and that it seems to have an important role allowing for the expression of shared beliefs and behaviors, changing social roles and expectations" (1985b: 80). At the beginning of the twentieth century, stand-up comedy as we recognize it now barely existed. Vaudeville shows included performers who recited comic monologues or demonstrated their skill in comic patter. Through the middle part of the century, stand-up comedians told jokes that were written for them and the skill lay in their delivery. From the 1970s onwards, stand-up comedy shifted in order to be able to engage with topical issues and to push the boundaries of what we consider acceptable. Originally a form that found its expression in small comedy clubs, the most successful comedians can now regularly play to arenas accommodating audiences of around 20,000.⁴ According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, "The largest audience for a comedian was 67,733 and was achieved by Mario Barth (Germany) at the Olympiastadion, Berlin, Germany, on 12 July 2008." Beyond live performance, stand-up comedians now regularly perform on television (see the range of shows on networks such as HBO, Comedy Central, the BBC, and on the streaming services); their work is also accessible on DVD and, of course, YouTube. These developments give stand-up comedy the largest reach it has ever had and affords comedians a platform from which they can influence their audiences on wide-ranging topics, including contentious issues such as race, religion, gender identity, and sexuality. In this way, it can be seen to have a greater potential social impact than other forms of live comedy such as improv and sketch shows. These may occasionally produce skits or sketches that make salient social or political points but the emphasis is much more often on entertainment than education.

One significant development in the dissemination of comedy in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first century occurred because of the rise in online platforms, which provided access to an audience for performers who might never otherwise have found one. It provides the creators of comedy with a new canvas, one which they must learn to manipulate to reach an ever-growing audience. In learning to manipulate this new medium, performers and writers created new forms, many of which focused on brevity and on their ability to be readily shared on social media platforms. Thus, we see the rise of memes, short video formats, and comic tweets. The Hamster Dance meme (the word *meme* coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*) is often cited as the first social media meme. It shows rows of animated hamsters dancing in time to a very simple tune. It has no purpose beyond bringing a smile to the face of the viewer and was an early experiment with what was possible on the internet. It aired on a single website and the address took the searcher directly to the meme and nothing else. As in other forms of

comedy, the meme has developed from being a form purely for entertainment into one that also offers satirical comment on contemporary events. Their success lies in their shareability. Whilst we are likely to encounter them alone, we may come to feel part of a community because we see them shared on social networks. They can also be directly shared amongst friends when what arrives into one inbox is shared immediately in real life with those socializing with the receiver at that moment.

The arrival of YouTube in 2005 and Twitter in 2006 increased the platforms on which memes and other forms of internet comedy could be shared. For example, the internet phenomenon of funny cat videos could not have taken off without a platform such as YouTube, which made the sharing and viewing of such videos easily possible. The interconnectedness of the platforms means that a meme can spread around the world in moments.

Not all forms of internet humor are predominately visual. Twitter lends itself equally to verbal humor and there are many Twitter accounts that focus entirely on jokes (e.g., @jokesUK, @Dadsaysjokes). The verbal form and the prevalence of Twitter also provides opportunities for parody accounts, which mock the expected form and content of Twitter accounts. One difficulty in the present political climate is recognizing which accounts are parodies and which are truly meant. The fact that so many individuals in the public realm have to preface their name with “real,” for example @realDonaldTrump, indicates how difficult it is for readers to be certain what they are reading. There is a parody account for Queen Elizabeth II (@Queen_UK) for which the humor revolves around tweets readers may believe reflect the Queen’s thoughts, such as an image showing the Queen peering around a curtain with the comment, “Tell him one’s not in. #trump” around the time of Trump’s visit to the UK. Humor also arises from the incongruity of some of the language used. In relation to the same visit, another tweet from this account reads “oh, drink up and piss off. One’s got shit to do. #trump.”

As well as parody, there have been other experiments with comic forms on Twitter. In 2009, Twitter live-streamed a comedy gig hosted by Carl Donnelly and featuring Ahir Shah, Adam Hess, Lou Sanders, and Flo and Joan. This allowed the Twitter audience to live-tweet in response to the gig. Other experiments have included a comedy gig in which all the jokes were tweeted. This also occurred in 2009 and was headlined by Mark Watson. Writing about the gig for *The Guardian*, Stephen Abbott (2009) outlined how the gig worked: “Acts were given 10 minutes each to deliver as many jokes as they could in 140-character chunks. To attend the gig, all the punters had to do was search for all the tweets appearing with the #tcgig (Twitter comedy gig) hashtag, using their computers or phones.” Whilst Twitter may or may not change the way we live, it is certainly in a position to add to the ways in which we receive comedy performance. Indeed, this experiment goes some way to addressing the mostly

lone reception of comedy online. As audience members “watched” the gig, they could tweet responses and see the responses tweeted by others.

One challenge that comes with sharing comedy on online platforms is that this sharing removes the comedy from its context. This can cause problems with joke reception, as evidenced by the outcry caused by Twitter responses to comments online adjudicators deem too offensive. When Trevor Noah replaced Jon Stewart as host of *The Daily Show* in 2015, his past tweets were subjected to scrutiny and ill-advised jokes that he tweeted two years previously were offered as evidence of his unsuitability to take up his new job. Noah weathered the storm, but the incident speaks to a difficulty that is particular to Facebook and Twitter where jokes appear out of context.

At the beginning of the period covered by this volume, the only concern regarding causing offense related to the depiction of sexual contact and such issues were covered by the Hayes Code in the US and by the Crown and the Church in the UK. Marginalized communities existed, of course, but not in ways that society had begun to identify and consider. In the early parts of the twentieth century, sexist and racist jokes could be made because the producers of the comedy were not concerned with causing offense and those likely to be offended had no channels through which to raise their objections, other than heckling. Part way through the twentieth century, sensitivities began to change. In the US, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin whilst in the UK, the Race Relations Act of 1965 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 sought to reduce discrimination in a more piecemeal way. Of course, this didn’t mean that comedians immediately stopped making jokes that targeted these groups or that sitcoms were immediately stripped clean of gender and race-based stereotypes, but this period marked the beginning of different sensibilities. It is also the case that increasingly since the mid-1960s, representatives of marginalized communities have taken to the stage themselves offering alternative voices and different ways to view the societies in which they live. It seemed, then, in the latter part of the twentieth century that comedy, in all its forms, could be a force for supporting social change. Depictions of different races, genders, and religions could educate the audience through humor. Stand-up comedians could give voice to the experiences of a wide range of individuals and communities. Comedy became less about pure entertainment and more about social reflection and a desire to influence social change.

Once we were happy to laugh at a guy stepping on a hose and then releasing the flow of water straight into his face; by the mid-twentieth century it appeared that comedy was developing into something much more serious. However, the heightened sensitivities of the twenty-first century threaten to neutralize comedy, rendering it harmless. Fortunately, there are writers and comedians in both the UK and the US who defend their right to shock, outrage, and offend.

Sarah Silverman is one such who regularly refuses to apologize for causing offense because, she says, “There’s still no way . . . to determine what people will find offensive, and caring about that won’t create better, or more impactful comedy. So what’s a girl to do? ‘I go with what I think is funny’” (2018). As the twenty-first century moves forward, we have to hope that comedians will continue to work with what they think is funny; not in order to deliberately cause offense but to ensure that comedy remains a vital part of contemporary discussions about who we are and what is important in our society.

CHAPTER ONE

Form

BRETT MILLS

INTRODUCTION

The history of the forms of comedy since the 1920s should be understood primarily as a consequence of developments in technologies of communication throughout the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first. That is, in earlier ages comedy was a form of culture whose communicative contexts were typically small-scale, as in the case of a comedy play being watched by a few hundred people at a theater. Even where forms of media—such as the book—enabled comic content to reach large numbers of people, these were typically consumed by individuals, reading a tome alone. The forms of technology that began to dominate in the twentieth century fundamentally altered these relationships, enabling comic forms to be disseminated to extremely large numbers of people, running into the millions, simultaneously. This means that understanding how comedy’s form developed during this time requires acknowledgement of the technological tools that fundamentally reshaped the relationships between producer and audience, given that, as seminal media theorist Marshall McLuhan notes, “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” ([1964] 2001: 9).

This chapter focuses on the various types of mass media that have become central to the lives of the majority of the global population since the 1920s. It does so through discussion of film, radio, television, and the internet. This is not to downplay or disregard the continued importance of other cultural forms—such as theater and the novel—to the history of comedy during this time. But it is instead to argue that the changes that have occurred in the last century are overwhelmingly a consequence of the development of mass media.

Indeed, that some of these media did not exist at the beginning of the twentieth century means that their relationships to comedy requires attention in order for the evolution of comedy during that time to be comprehended. In focusing on the mass media, it is precisely the “mass” aspect which is paramount. That these media reach extremely large numbers of people, often disregarding national boundaries, means that, as communications theorist Denis McQuail argues, they “are for most people the main channel of cultural representation and expression, and the primary source of images of social reality and materials for forming and maintaining social identity” (2010: 4).

That mass media can play such a significant contributory role in activities of self-expression has meant that they have often been regulated in order to manage the expectations of the large numbers of people that consume them. For comedy, whose social role is often that of saying the unsayable and trampling over taboos (Jenkins 1994; Bucaria and Barra 2016), the variety of viewpoints contained within mass audiences becomes a real problem. Whereas in stand-up a comedian is able to respond to the audience in front of them, in mass media a comic text’s production is typically complete prior to its reception by audiences, and so it must work from assumptions about how those audiences will respond to the humor on offer. The “mass” nature of mass media, then, has resulted in comic form having to respond to this decoupling of audience and performer, and this has resulted in a range of texts across film, radio, television, and the internet. It is clear to see that there is now more comedy than there has ever been, and more routes through which it can be disseminated; but this proliferation has also required comedy to acknowledge its social effects. It may be this latter aspect which represents the most fundamental change in comic form in the last hundred years.

FILM

That the nature of mass media comedy is significantly informed by the technologies and organizational structures that arise from those technologies, can be seen in the history of film comedy. This section predominantly focuses on Anglophone comedy cinema, because this has been the dominant form of global film-making and distribution for much of the medium’s history. In particular, Hollywood—as both an institution and as a series of film-making practices—has dominated how cinema has come to be understood the world over. And Hollywood has, throughout its history, made comedy.

It was in the 1910s and 1920s that, according to film historian Douglas Gomery, Hollywood began to “dominate the world film industry” (2005: 7). It did so through the development of what has become known as the “Hollywood studio system.” This system was, according to film historian Thomas Schatz, one in which production and distribution was organized via studios, each of

which “developed a repertoire of contract stars and story formulas that were refined and continually recirculated through the marketplace” ([1989] 1998: 7). Communications scholar Janet Staiger argues that therefore the system can be seen as “an instance of the economic system of capitalism” (1985: 88), given that it positioned film as a product more than an art form, and that what was produced responded to ticket sales and audience feedback. Via this system film was an economic product on a par with other forms of goods under capitalism, and it was for this reason that studios not only managed the production of cinema but also its distribution. Studios owned distribution systems, such as cinemas, ensuring their goods could be effectively circulated and demand and supply managed. The studio system’s high point is understood to be the 1930s–1950s, in which the five largest studios received three-quarters of the income generated from cinema ticket sales in the United States (Gomery 2005: 71). Indeed, it was the studios’ success that contributed to their downfall, for successful challenges from independent cinemas meant the US Supreme Court decreed in 1948 that the studios must sell their cinema chains (Schatz 2008: 16). Cinema was also encountering considerable competition from television, for audiences found they could receive entertainment directly into their own homes. That said, “the Hollywood studio system never died . . . [for it] is still made up of a small set of corporations that produce, distribute and present films for profit” (Gomery 2005: 198). While previous forms of comic culture inevitably circulated within financial regimes, the Hollywood studio system represents a reshaping of culture as nothing more than an economic good. And thus the kinds of comedy that have been produced for cinema should be understood within this context. While this is true of all genres and modes that cinema produces, this may represent a particular challenge for comedy, whose flouting of rules may be seen to sit uneasily within such pragmatic and goal-orientated production regimes.

The rise of the studio system coincided with the development of sound technology, which meant film moved from the silent era to talkies. The silent era is most closely associated with gag-based and slapstick comedy centered on the exploits of an individual at odds with the world around them. These were often short films, such as those of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Harold Lloyd. Films such as these certainly drew on narrative, but their main pleasures were those of a succession of sight gags, with the narrative functioning primarily simply as a way of tying these jokes together. Importantly, this form of comedy relies heavily on the skills of the performer presenting them, and thus the pleasure they offer marries the content of the joke with appreciation of such skill. Steve Seidman refers to this as “comedian comedy,” which foregrounds the “self-ness of the comedian” (1981: 4), in which audiences are invited to bring extra-textual knowledge to their reading of the comedy. It matters because the Hollywood studio system—and much Western culture—relies on broadly

unexamined notions of “realism” for their meaning, in which the world created by the fiction is intended to be complete, comprehensible, and distinct from that of the viewer. Comedy, on the other hand, “with its maintenance of the relationship between performer and audience . . . , is a genre which tends to promote an active spectator through these extrafictional features” (1981: 5). This strand of comedy situates this kind of performer as an “outsider” (1981: 6). The outsider aspect is persistently evident in the foregrounding of the performer’s skills, but it means that comic characters have also typically been outsiders. So Charlie Chaplin’s “Little Tramp” character is, according to Alan Dale, “antisocial” and whose “trickster anarchy” means he is constantly in conflict with representations of social order, such as policemen (2000: 39, 44). Similarly, Harold Lloyd’s comic persona is one in which he “affects a self-image which obscures a hidden true self” (Seidman 1981: 141), depicting a character at odds with social niceties and therefore required to behave in unnatural ways in order to fit in. The content of these comedies, and the pleasures they offered, therefore aligned with comedy’s uneasy position within the studio system, for that system’s reliance on narrative coherence and diegetic realism was not fundamental to how comedy had hitherto been structured. From the off, the relationship between comedy and the film industry was strained, and the subsequent history of the use of humor in cinema can be seen as an ongoing attempt to reconcile these tensions.

One of the key ways this was achieved was through the movement to narrative comedy, which affected the kinds of films that were produced. For much of the silent era, comedies were shorts, lasting ten minutes or so; but the studio system was one that prioritized feature-length productions. These necessarily foregrounded narrative as a guiding principle, in which the pleasures offered audiences were those of a coherent story whose ending functioned as a resolution. And it was the need to tell stories efficiently and intelligibly that led to the development of what film historians Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell note has been dubbed “*classical Hollywood cinema*,” in which techniques of framing and editing helped audiences piece together a succession of images into an intelligible story (2010: 32, *italics in original*). Whereas “comedian comedy” was centered on the comic moment, narrative comedy instead prioritized the humorous story, which—while often peppered with discrete comic moments—also functioned as a coherent whole. This led to the development of many different kinds of comic film, whose early precursors continue to inform contemporary film-making. For example, according to Duane Byrge and Robert Milton Miller, screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s are “at heart a love story,” in which “improbable events, [and] mistaken identities” serve as initial barriers to a heterosexual couple, but whose resolution typically involves eventual marriage that gives “some whiff of order . . . to the previous narrative chaos” (1991: 2–3). Here comedy arises out of

disorder, and it is via the rejection of such disorder that narrative resolution can be achieved.

Screwball comedy's characteristics can be seen to underpin the representation of humorous narratives concerning love and romance ever since. But such storytelling also attests to the ongoing negotiation required within film-making with regard to the relationships between narrative and comedy. For example, Wes Gehring argues the screwball comedy can be understood as foregrounding its comic aspects, whereas the romantic comedy prioritizes the romantic component but tells its story via comedic means (2002: 1). That such subgenres can be delineated evidences how comedy and narrative remain troubled bedfellows, and that the narrative disruption that comic moments often produce continue to be something that film-makers must pay attention to. This uneasy alliance of comedy and narrative means that analyses of humorous stories often have difficulty in delineating their ideologies or politics. For example, screwball comedy can, in its comic moments, be seen to offer up progressive representations of women that are significantly different to those in other genres. This is because the comedy often arises from female characters' refusal to conform to the social expectations placed upon them. Here the comedy can be seen to celebrate female power, and to reject the notion that women should behave in ways that are comprehensible or desirable to men. However, the fact that so many screwball comedies' narratives end with a heterosexual coupling means that such disruptive femininity is presented as "resolved," offering a "traditional" representation of male-female interactions within which the woman's comic vigor is eradicated at the end of the story. This problem is seen to afflict romantic comedies too, which film studies scholar Claire Mortimer often criticizes as "reactionary," depicting women as "needy and superficial, being obsessed with finding 'the one' and marriage" (2010: 133). Delineating the cultural politics of narrativized comedy remains problematic, then, for the pleasures offered by a film's narrative might be quite at odds with those of the comic moments that constitute the majority of the text's running time. While it may be the case that such contradictions exist in a wide range of genres, comedy's focus on particular moments as loci of pleasure means that the tension is more acute.

Furthermore, comedy's forms remain more mutable and wide-ranging than may be the case for other genres because it might be more fruitful to not think of it as a genre at all. Genre studies scholars Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik argue it should instead be thought of as a "*mode*" (1990: 19, italics in original), which can be applied to a range of other genres. This suggests we can distinguish between "comedy" as a form of expression, and "a comedy" which is a narrative text whose primary function is the generation of humor. For example, a parodic film "has its own techniques and methods, but no particular form or structure" (1990: 19), meaning that it adopts a comic mode, rather than being *a* comedy. In parody, humor is used precisely to mock the conventions of other genres, or

particular ways in which stories are told, and thus comedy here serves as a tool of expression that can be grafted onto the conventions of the genre being parodied. Parody is, according to Dan Harries, “the process of recontextualizing a target or source text through the transformation of its textual (and contextual) elements, thus creating a *new* text” (2000: 6, italics in original). That parody mocks other genres or texts means that it has often been seen as not a genre in itself, and its reliance on other texts means it doesn’t conform to normalized notions of authorial creativity that imbue the ways in which cultural hierarchies come into being. Given that all forms of comedy struggle for social and cultural approval, parody represents a maligned form of cultural communication, despite its particular communicative techniques and social purpose of critiquing the ways in which stories are told.

As a mode, comedy is able to be grafted onto a wide range of other forms, precisely in order to make explicit and destabilize the norms of those forms. For example, the “Carry On . . .” sequence of British comedy films produced primarily in the 1950s to 1970s often take place in historical settings, such as the ancient Rome of *Carry on Cleo* (dir. Gerald Thomas 1964) and the British naval history of *Carry on Jack* (dir. Gerald Thomas 1963). According to Marcia Landy, in doing so they “undermine official narratives of the past,” resulting in a “counter-history” that makes explicit the contribution non-comic forms of film-making make to those histories (2011: 177). Furthermore, as works that often critique authority figures and institutions they represent an attack on the sociopolitical orders that produce and authorize the narratives being parodied. By this account, comedy functions less as a mode for critiquing how film works, and more as a tool for destabilizing the very systems that enable cultural hierarchies to come into being. Comedy’s mutability as a mode enables it to marry other cinematic genres too, such as horror. This is because both comedy and horror have, according to film scholar William Paul, an “aesthetic aim [which] is raising rabble,” primarily “*because of* their willingness to confront things we normally feel compelled to look away from” (1994: 21, 20, italics in original). These genres represent an attack upon the norms of civilized society, foregrounding pleasure over detached reflection, and refusing to distinguish between what should and should not be seen.

That said, it is important not to overstate the revolutionary or disruptive nature of film comedy, not least because its status as a commercial product validated by the production and distribution systems that enable it to come into being inevitably reduces its radical force. After all, comedy can be used to reinforce or normalize regressive or repressive ideologies as much as it can do otherwise. While comedy represents narratives and characters that fail to conform to social norms, it does so in a manner that necessarily renders them laughable. By this process, alternative behavior or viewpoints themselves become mocked, offered up for cinema audiences to find laughable, reassured

that others adopt the same view through the shared sound of laughter in the cinema. This means comic film can be critiqued for its conservative representations as much as the humorous mode might function as a sociopolitical critique.

Perhaps one of the most obvious ways in which this takes place is in terms of comedy's relation to the nation, where the view that the most sensible way to organize the world is via the nation-state is rarely held up for scrutiny. To be sure, comedy can critique ideas of particular nations, and, as Nigel Mather argues, the "comic mode, when effectively mixed with dramatic and compelling explorations of ethnicity in 'everyday' . . . society, is . . . particularly well suited to depictions of 'hybrid' groups and communities" (2006: 112). That is, the contradictory relationships that minority ethnic groups are often forced to have with their nations aligns neatly with the distanced, reflective attitude comedy employs. But this approach rarely questions the idea of the nation *itself*, and it is the case that one of the ways in which nations function as what political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983) calls "imagined communities" is via the forms of culture they produce, including comedy and film. This means that the comedy produced by Hollywood becomes understood as "American," despite it failing to depict the lives and viewpoints of large swathes of that country's population. Similarly, "British comedy" is a powerful marketing tool for particular kinds of comedy such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (dir. Mike Newell 1994) and *Johnny English* (dir. Peter Howitt 2003), despite the difficulties in delineating what that term means, either in terms of finance and production, or because of the complexities of the multi-nation status of the UK. This suggests film comedy serves as a tool to unite a nation, despite legitimate tensions that might exist within it, and it may do so in a manner that allows some voices to be heard while others are excluded. What this shows is the power that film comedy has, and its status as a tool for reflecting and commenting upon societal concerns. While tensions persist in film comedy form between the gag and the narrative, its history evidences an ongoing process in managing those contradictions in a manner that simultaneously destabilizes and reaffirms.

RADIO

The negotiation of joke and narrative has informed a variety of media, not just film. The history of the forms of radio comedy similarly attests to ongoing formal mutations that negotiate between the heritage of humor prior to the advent of mass communication, and the specifics of media that arose from particular technological developments. Unlike the other media discussed in this chapter, radio has certain characteristics that arise from its status as a solely aural medium. So, the kinds of sight gags that constituted the majority of early silent film comedy are literally impossible to render meaningfully on radio, and it is a medium that therefore relies on the use of sound alone. While this may,

at first thought, appear to be so obvious a statement as to be mundane, it is worth noting that comic forms must necessarily arise from, and make use of, the characteristics of the technology they employ. While this means we can, according to radio theorist Andrew Crisell, consider radio “a *blind* medium,” the use of voice and sound means that it is also understood as an “*interpersonal*” one, better able to create a meaningful relationship between the sender and receiver of messages than might be the case for other media (1994: 3, italics in original). This is also due to radio’s persistent interest in liveness, so that even if a particular program is not live, the medium can be understood as forever in the “present-tense” (1994: 9). The liveness situates the experience of the listener alongside the action as it happens in a manner quite different to film or books, which often instead foreground their status as presenting moments from the past. Furthermore, radio’s lack of imagery means it “appeal[s] to the imagination” (1994: 7), requiring listeners to supply the visuals the technology cannot transmit. Radio’s lack of imagery constitutes a useful tool for modes and genres such as comedy, because the truly fantastical can be communicated without the need to be created as a thing to be seen. The most obvious example of the use of this ability is perhaps in *The Goon Show* (BBC Home Service 1951–60), which drew on radio’s ability to conjure up any location to produce episodes set in “the South Pole, the moon, or even up somebody’s trouser-leg” (1994: 171). This freedom is something that radio comedy has throughout its history been keen to exploit.

The history of radio comedy is also dependent on cultural forms of comedy that preceded it. In particular, radio drew on performers and writers who had worked in theatrical forms such as music hall and vaudeville for its initial personnel, which is unsurprising given that these were the only places where comedy was routinely being produced, developed, and performed. The theatrical nature of that comedy aligned neatly with the liveness of radio, given that both theater and radio comedy rely on a closeness of performer and audience for the maximum humorous effect. But working out how theatrical performers might best work on radio was not an easy task, not least because the physical, visual nature of such performance could not be transferred from one to the other. More than this, radio performers were required to deliver their material to a microphone, a static object absent from the theater that reduced the performers’ ability to roam the stage. Performers here were often working for two, contradictory audiences; the one in the studio who were watching a live performance, and that at home unable to see the act.

What has emerged for radio is a number of discrete forms of comedy, such as the sketch show, the panel show, and the game show. Perhaps the most dominant of these is the sitcom, in which recurring characters in regular settings work their way through a narrative whose telling produces humor. The sitcom as a form will be explored more in the following section on television, but what is

worth noting here is the cross-medium nature of the genre. For many decades, performers and programs that have been successful on radio have subsequently moved to television, with varying degrees of success. The movement from radio to television necessarily highlights the differences between the two media, where the visual component of television affects the kinds of humor that can be employed, while undercutting the reliance on audiences' imaginations to power that humor. A radio program such as *Hancock's Half-Hour* (BBC Light Programme 1954–61) drew on its eponymous star's vocal skills to considerable comic effect, conjuring up a seedy post-war world. The television version capitalizes on this, but tellingly remains, at heart, a piece of radio, with the majority of its humor arising from the vocal delivery of its main character. In the UK, radio comedy remains a testing-ground for new programs and comedians, producing much of the material that then goes on to be made for television. As such, its formal qualities significantly influence the kinds of comedy that get made for mass audiences across a range of media, and its impact on comic culture as a whole should not be understated.

This is despite the assumption that there was, in the past, an era that we might call the "golden age" of radio comedy—a time understood as that before the advent and rise of television in which radio was the mass medium that drew families, communities, and nations together. That radio could work in this way, and that comedy is particularly suited to engendering ideas of commonality, is evident in the centrality of comedy output during the Second World War. Central here is *ITMA*—an abbreviation of "It's That Man Again," a deliberately belittling reference to Hitler (BBC Light Programme 1939–49)—the "most popular radio comedy series ever produced" with worldwide listener numbers of over 30 million (Foster and Furst 1996: 27). It is seen as a program that was the first to successfully move away from its theatrical origins, and, via the use of word-play and quick-fire sketches, instead capitalize on the characteristics of radio as a distinct medium. But it is the medium's technology that enables such programs to reach large, disparate audiences—all of whom consume the program at the same time—that means a program such as *ITMA* can function in the nation-building manner that it did. While contemporary radio comedy reaches much smaller audiences, its persistence evidences a desire to use the medium for entertainment, and that radio's characteristics make possible kinds of humor unavailable in other media.

The kinds of comic entertainment that radio enables are typically shaped around humorous talk, and thus the sitcom is not the only humorous form that persisted on the medium. Persisting with its vaudeville roots, American radio for many decades until the 1950s doggedly attempted to revive the variety show, despite its spectacular nature being usurped by television's ability to visually depict the turns' acts. In the UK, programs such as *Just a Minute* (BBC Radio 4 1967–) and *I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue* (BBC Radio 4 1972–) blend

comedy with quiz and game show tropes, showing how comedy as a mode can be grafted onto other forms, and therefore the difficulty in definitely ascribing genre categories to humorous content. This means programs such as *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (BBC Radio 4 1978–2018) can be referred to as “comedy drama” (Donovan 1991: 124), a catch-all term that acknowledges the series’ drawing on the strong narrative conventions of drama but for the parodic purposes of comedy. The blurring of boundaries is evidenced in production terms too, whereby the producer of the original series, Geoffrey Perkins, notes that “there was some debate when the program started about whether we should have a studio audience, since at that time nearly all radio comedy shows had one” (1985: 8). This shows that while broadcast radio comedy has purportedly moved on from its origins in music hall and vaudeville, the centrality of the audience as an aural component of the form persists and helps signal a program’s comic intent to its audience.

That said, the most recent development in audio comedy is the podcast. What is significant about the podcast is that while its entirely aural status means that textually it functions identically to radio, the technology that distributes it is not broadcasting, and therefore the mass nature of simultaneous consumption is eradicated. This suggests that there are characteristics of aural communication that persist whether or not it is delivered via technology that encourages audiences to consume collectively. Indeed, it is precisely because podcasting exists outside of broadcast networks that renders it attractive to some comedians, particularly those who define their authenticity by their “outsider” status. Given that podcasts are not required to fit into broadcasting schedules, it is possible for episodes to be of any length, and for episodes of a single series to be multiple lengths, which is all-but impossible on broadcast radio.

TELEVISION

The history of television comedy is aligned with, but also differs from, that of radio. As noted above, one of the routes from which comedians and comedy programs come to be on television is when they are adapted from successful radio series. This remains a key process in British comedy production, where a broadcaster such as the BBC can draw on its cross-media platforms to produce comedy for radio, television, and the internet. Understanding the history of television comedy, then, requires acknowledgement of that medium’s debt to radio. While contemporary television comedy—especially outside the UK—is not entirely dependent on remakes of radio series, it was developments in comedy narratives that were undertaken when radio was a fledgling medium that came to be taken up by television later. That is, the genres and forms that now constitute much of television comedy had their inception in radio. And just as radio had to spend quite some time working out how to make comedy

work in a medium that has sound as its only form of communication, so television comedy has had to work through how humor works best given that medium's technological and cultural aspects.

After all, television comedy might initially be thought of as aligning with that which occurs in film. Such an assumption would work from the acknowledgement that both film and television are audio-visual media, and thus have the same communicative strategies at their disposal. While this does align the two in a manner that distinguishes them from radio, it ignores fundamental aspects of television that mean it differs significantly from film. These arise from television as a medium of broadcasting, and that broadcasting is a way of delivering media to audiences that fundamentally shapes the nature of every program within it. What is broadcast by television is typically a ceaseless array of sequential programs that make up a schedule. Audiences sometimes watch television as a sequence, tuning into a channel rather than specific programs, perhaps catching the end of a program that they have not seen the start of; this is very rare in cinema, and the medium assumes audiences watch a film as a complete and discrete text. Television, however, cannot rely on audiences' cinematic consumption patterns, and it can be the case that many viewers watch, say, the second episode of a series without having seen the first. Indeed, the fact that many television programs are made up of multiple discrete episodes—rather than as self-contained, complete texts as in the vast majority of film—significantly changes how stories can, and must, be told.

Episodic television typically contains narratives that are complete within particular episodes, so that that episode hangs together as a whole, *and* narratives that stretch across multiple episodes, and maybe for many years. *Friends* (NBC 1994–2004), for example, is able to signal the self-contained nature of each episode's narrative through episode titles (“The One with the Thumb”; “The One Where the Monkey Gets Away”) where the use of the recurring “the one” evidences the specificity of those episodes. But, at the same time, *Friends* has numerous multi-episode narratives, such as Phoebe's pregnancy and the movement into coupledness of Chandler and Monica. Indeed, the whole 236 episodes of the series are driven by the “will they/won't they?” romantic narrative of Ross and Rachel, which is established in the very first episode, and resolved in the finale. Each episode, then, functions narratively as a self-contained piece and as a contributor to that ongoing storyline, requiring forms of storytelling absent in cinema, which is not episodic. That these episodes are also part of the sequence of broadcasting that is a television schedule, means that television can be understood as characterized by what media theorist Raymond Williams calls “flow” ([1974] 2003: 86–120), in which the viewer's experience is of multiple narratives from a range of programs overlapping within a schedule, quite different from the discrete textual forms of other media. While it is possible, of course, to watch films or read books in manners

that reorganize their narratives, “flow” points to the idea that in television (and radio) this is “planned” as an inherent part of the medium “as a technology and as a cultural form” ([1974] 2003: 86). While newer forms of television delivery, such as online platforms like Netflix, offer up a boxset experience that could be seen as not conforming to flow, it is noticeable that the programs on these services continue overwhelmingly to be structured around episodes, and therefore maintain the kinds of fractured narrative that have defined broadcasting since its inception. To understand how television comedy works, then, requires taking this episodic nature into account.

The most prominent form of episodic television comedy is the sitcom. Media theorist Lawrence Mintz defines a sitcom as “a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise” (1985a: 114). However, this definition applies to many television genres, such as the soap opera or the crime drama series and can be seen as merely representative of the logical outcome of television’s nature as “flow.” The key thing, according to television studies scholar Brett Mills, is that sitcom is “*a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent*” (2009: 49, italics in original), which offers itself to its audiences as something whose primary pleasures will be associated with comedy. To be sure, sitcom has pleasures other than this, such as the Ross–Rachel romance in *Friends*. But its primary goal is the generation of humor, and it is around this that all aspects of it orbit. The sitcom can be distinguished from many other episodic television genres, then, via this “comic impetus” (2009: 5), which functions as the primary motivation for the creation and consumption of the genre.

The centrality of this “impetus” is evident in sitcom’s textual characteristics, and the industrial history that brought these into being. As noted above, in its early years broadcasting sought to use music hall and vaudeville comedians in its programming, given those performers’ established status and skills, but struggled to adapt their theatrical performance to the needs of these new media. Television quickly adopted the “classical Hollywood cinema” approach to storytelling in which framing and editing were used to construct a sense of space and communicate narratives to audiences. Theatrical traditions, however, did not use such framing or editing, as edits and close-ups are not possible in the theater. Sitcom—like film comedy—had to find ways to translate the comic aspects of theatrical performance into the visual language of television, while at the same time developing newer forms of comedy that could exploit that language, enabling kinds of humor impossible in theater. *I Love Lucy* (CBS 1951–7) is seen to be the program that most effectively established the visual grammar of television comedy, via a production process media scholar Patricia Mellencamp refers to as the “three-headed monster” (1992: 322). Here a piece of comic dialog between two performers was shot with three cameras, with one capturing a wide shot of both characters and the other two cameras each focused

on the face of an individual performer. Cross-cutting allowed exchanges to be captured in close-up, in a manner comparable to conventional television storytelling. But important to the “three-headed monster” was that the close-up also allowed characters’ reactions to be filmed, and such shots became a significant part of any comic sequence. Reaction shots are important partly because they signal the comic intent of any moment, but also because they enable a program to get two laughs from one joke; a laugh from the joke itself, and another from a reactor’s response to it. By this process, reaction to events became an important part of the grammar of comic storytelling in a manner less pronounced in other genres. By focusing on reaction, television comedy moved away from its theatrical origins, establishing a set of textual conventions that remain dominant in the sitcom today.

The episodic form of television comedy such as the sitcom has implications for the politics of comedy on television. Indeed, given that the sitcom was for many decades of the twentieth century the most popular form of broadcasting on American television, it can be examined in terms of the representations it offered and its reflection of American culture. In the 1950s, suburbia began to symbolize the American dream, and that dream included good homes full of consumer goods. Sitcoms such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC 1952–66) centered on gentle family disputes as their comic material, but did so, according to a study of sitcoms by Gerard Jones, in “the suburban Neverland of family sitcoms, in which details of locale and occupation are intentionally evaded and a homogenous, threatless world is shown already in place, waiting to welcome the new exurbanite” (1992: 95). That the family came to be the dominant location for the sitcom is unsurprising, given the domestic consumption of television; the depictions on-screen mirror those of the (assumed) audience watching. The family, of course, also offers a wide variety of possible plotlines, which is necessary for a narrative-hungry comic form such as the episodic sitcom. But the need for each episode to come to some sort of resolution means that it is unlikely for the form to ever be truly transgressive, given that any significant change in a program’s dynamics upsets the format that underpins each episode. This means the sitcom can be seen as being inherently conservative, precisely because of its episodic nature. It also means that the form can function to normalize certain kinds of behaviors, their recurrence across multiple episodes serving to render those behaviors legitimate through their very regularity.

As such, the sitcom can be understood as a “comedy of manners,” depicting characters negotiating societies with complex social rules. The comic matter here concerns the transgression of those rules, in which characters are depicted as humorous because they fail to behave as is socially acceptable. But the position offered to audiences is one in which this behavior is deemed laughable, with “correct” behavior the yardstick against which it is measured and a set of

standards assumed to be comprehensible and acceptable to all. The learning that sitcom characters go through in such comedies is that of learning how to behave, and episodes' resolutions often pivot on their realization of their transgression. But this means the sitcom finds real difficulty in depicting alternative or transgressive viewpoints or lifestyles; or, if it does so, it encounters problems in offering these not as objects of ridicule. That the episodic nature of broadcasting necessitates certain kinds of storytelling, and that these are necessarily conservative, can be seen to undermine the transgressive nature of comedy prior to the advent of mass media.

Indeed, the sitcom has been routinely criticized for its failure to engage with, and represent, ideologies and cultures beyond those associated with the hegemonic, middle-class, white experience. In an American context, this has meant the form has, for decades, been criticized for its representation of race. For example, while *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984–92) was one of the most successful sitcoms of the 1980s, its representation of an African American family has been critiqued by Michael Real for aligning with “myths of blackness” resulting in a “conformist compromise” that means it does not trouble existing racial hierarchies (2003: 225, 237). Similarly, the representation of gender in sitcom has been criticized by cultural historian Maggie Andrews as dominated by comedy in “which women were portrayed as the objects of humour,” often because of their failure to conform to “the idealised model of the post-war housewife” (1998: 50, 55). At the same time, a series such as *Girls* (HBO 2012–17) can, according to gender studies scholar Rebecca Wanzo, be seen to offer both “new representations for and by young women,” even while they are constrained by depictions of female characters that are “infantilized and unlikeable” (2016: 30, 53). While these criticisms can be leveled at culture more broadly, and comedy in particular, the argument here is that it is precisely the form of the sitcom that makes alternative depictions difficult, while the volume of episodes serves to reinforce the normalcy of the “manners” that are transgressed by comic figures. The success of the sitcom, then, is also regarded as its fundamental flaw, and the reshaping of comedy in response to the characteristics of the medium that disseminates it results in humorous forms dictated by the technology it relies upon.

It may be the case, then, that looking at other forms of comedy on television might reveal spaces where different kinds of humor can take place. For example, there is a strong and persistent strain of comedy as satire on television, using the medium as a conduit for discussion of high-profile events and talking points. Indeed, there is an argument that satire's ability to engage audiences in complex, political ideas is more powerful than serious approaches to those topics, given that it often reaches larger audiences. Programs such as *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central 1996–) and *Last Week Tonight* (HBO 2014–) have inveigled themselves into the public conversation about politics and sociocultural matters

particularly for younger audiences whose interest in “traditional” forms of news is small compared to older people. In this way, television functions as a “public sphere,” which is “a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest [is] institutionally guaranteed” (McCarthy 1989: xi). This aligns the use of comedy with the notion that television can function as a public good—enshrined in a number of countries in the concept of “public service broadcasting”—whose purpose is to allow a space for citizens to come together and debate matters of the day. That it is satirical programs that allow for this in the United States is significant, for it suggests that it is one country in which comedy is more easily aligned with public debate than more serious approaches, especially for younger audiences.

But this is not to suggest complete freedom, and one of the contexts that all forms of television have always circulated within is concerns over the medium’s effects upon those who watch it. As a mass medium, television has been subject since its inception to regulations that circumscribe its output. This is partly attributable to the technology that disseminates it, in that television is usually broadcast directly into the home, which is normally understood as a private space. So, unlike theater and cinema, broadcasting functions within the domestic space, and this is a context that homeowners understandably want to maintain control over. More than this, television has been subject to regulations because it is harder to control who has access to it than other forms of culture. So, where cinema can have age restrictions thus barring younger people from entering premises screening content deemed inappropriate, television’s domestic location makes it easier for anyone to stumble across anything. While regulations have applied to all forms of broadcasting, comedy has always been subject to particular inflections of rules because of its specific nature. That is, while comedy might be expected to transgress cultural norms and find humor in socially unacceptable representations, it can also engender offense, especially when humor is made about taboo subjects. These include matters such as death and sex, but are also time-specific, with acts of war or terrorism commonly demarcated as only to be approached seriously for some time. Of course, what is offensive to one audience member might be joyously anarchic to another, and the personalized nature of humor is often difficult to align with the mass nature of broadcasting. For example, generational differences abound, in that age-related attitudes to matters such as race or sex mean that what is a traditional form of humor to one person might be outdated and offensive to another. While different channels, and different programs, go out of their way to signal their comic tendencies in order to deter audiences likely to be offended by content from watching, this does not negate the possibility of accidental consumption. This means that the technology of television—aligned with its employment as a form of communication intended to bring people together—can regularly clash with differing attitudes toward humor, and the purposes to

which it is put. Debates over satirical programs, then, highlight this contradiction, and function as a form of broadcasting forever negotiating comic excess and broadcasting's conservatism.

It is clear that there are forms on television whose primary aim is humor, but it is important to note that comedy can appear across the medium in a range of genres and formats. In the United States, there is a tradition of comic monologues on late night talk shows such as *Late Show with David Letterman* (CBS 1993–2015) and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* (NBC 1992–2014). These monologues are commonly topical, reflecting on that day's events, and therefore capitalize on the live aspect of these programs as well as their regular, daily broadcast that means television functions as an ongoing conversation between program-makers and audiences. In the UK, the comedy panel show uses the quiz format to enable celebrity guests to engage in comic banter about certain topics, whether this is news events in *Have I Got News For You* (BBC 1990–) or sport in *A Question of Sport* (BBC 1970–). These are usually filmed in front of a studio audience, so that even though they are not broadcast live, they are given the impression of liveness.

The sketch show similarly often foregrounds its theatrical roots, with an array of skits and recurring performers that produces a sequence of entertainments not dissimilar to that previously found in variety and music hall. But this is only to list those genres defined by their “comic impetus” and ignores comedy as an aspect of television more broadly. After all, even avowedly serious genres such as the news often contain comic stories, typically at the end of bulletins, functioning as a counterpoint to the heavyweight material that has preceded it. What this shows is the variety of uses to which television puts comedy, and humor's ability to align with multiple forms. That said, it is also apparent that this use is affected by the genre at hand, such that the use of humor in news is of a different kind to that in sketch shows or sitcoms. The forms of comedy on television, then, arise from the context within which humor is placed, and this evidences not only the limits that are placed on humor, but also television's usages of humor for particular ends.

THE INTERNET

The internet represents a significant change in the ways in which culture as a whole is made and distributed, and this has significant implications for comedy. Most importantly, as an international network not owned by any organization, it offers the opportunity for anyone with the necessary technology to make content and distribute it. It also allows anyone who can afford the required technology to access that content. As such, it can be seen as a technology that circumvents the authorized producers and distributors that have typically defined how radio and television broadcast material. Debates about the extent

to which this has happened in practice persist, so that for people such as new media theorist David Gauntlett, the internet “allows people to express themselves,” “brings people together,” and is “changing politics” (2000: 12–17), while others such as communications scholar James Curran note that “the world is very unequal, and this limits participation in an internet-mediated global dialog” (2012: 9). The internet is not the panacea to social inequalities that it was first purported to be, even though its technology has enabled an expansion in the kinds of communication that are available, and the access people have to it. It is within these contexts that changes in comedy form have taken place; indeed, unpicking the forms of comedy that are distributed via the internet helps evidence the contradictory nature of the technology as a whole.

Dominant here is YouTube. As a platform that distributes discrete, defined videos, and which offers these categorized by content type and by channels, it clearly follows the structuring principles of broadcast media such as television and radio. Yet YouTube also allows the dissemination of amateur content. It is the fact that material produced outside of the traditional production regimes can be made available to large audiences that can enable comedy form and content to mutate in ways typically managed by other broadcasters. This amateur aspect not only defines the status of the makers, but also the nature of what is produced, with much material on YouTube having sound and image quality that would be deemed unprofessional elsewhere. This is not to criticize this material; it is to say that this amateur approach makes available a range of aesthetics largely absent elsewhere. Furthermore, YouTube content is often understood as work-in-progress in that it may be uploaded before it is finished in order to get feedback as part of the production process. Furthermore, a key aspect of YouTube is that viewers can post comments beneath videos, meaning that the material is part of a dialog in which the platform sees feedback as of value as much as the video itself. This whole process makes it much easier, therefore, for makers of comedy to find out how people are responding to their work as it is being made, rather than the model of traditional broadcasters in which only the finished product is made available for viewing. This feedback loop means that makers of comedy are attracted to it because the performer–audience relationship is closer to that of theater, whereby comedians can respond directly to audience reactions. That comedy should work so well in this space is evident in YouTube establishing in 2013 a “comedy week,” in which both established and up-and-coming writers and performers delivered webcasts of sketches, stand-up routines, and other comic material (see Smith 2013).

That YouTube and other online platforms are not bound by traditional notions of program scheduling means that the form of comedy can change considerably. While television comedy, for example, is largely structured around sitcoms and sketch shows in order to capitalize on the episodic nature of the medium, this does not necessarily apply online. Material can vary in length, be

one-off, or have hundreds of episodes. The ubiquity of video cameras means that everyday life—rather than fictional material produced explicitly for broadcast—can become fodder for dissemination. While television programs such as *You’ve Been Framed!* (ITV 1990–) and *America’s Funniest Home Videos* (ABC 1989–) take advantage of this material, it is online where it is normalized and dominant. Perhaps unforeseen is the extent to which this has offered up animal behavior as ripe for comic viewership, with scores of videos of many species—typically pets—behaving in ways which are deemed comic. Indeed, this is so dominant that Radha O’Meara (2014) argues that cats “rule” YouTube, whose humor arises from their “liberated uninhibitedness viewers can only desire.” That this material should be so successful attests to the mutations in comic form and content that the internet has wrought, and points to links between particular kinds of technology, the content–audience relationships that are constructed by that technology, and the material that therefore becomes successful on that technology.

However, it is not only video platforms such as YouTube that evidence how the internet has changed the form and content of comedy. For example, social media such as Twitter and Facebook enable rapid forms of communication to be disseminated among large numbers of people. That these media are constantly updated means that users can rapidly respond to real-world events, offering a space for social critique, discussion, and mockery. And a wider variety of people can use these media, meaning that up-and-coming comedians can use alternative ways to access audiences that sidestep the gatekeepers in traditional media or comedy clubs. However, it is the case that the structures of these social media encourage and enable particular kinds of humor, while rendering others difficult or impossible. For example, the 280-character limit that Twitter imposes on its tweets makes longer-form joke-telling all-but impossible. By this process Twitter humor is mutating into something discrete in itself, quite different to the longer-form nature of stand-up routines or the narrativized comedy encountered on radio, film, and television. Furthermore, Twitter humor is written, and therefore should be aligned with literature, given that it lacks visual or aural aspects. This is an interesting development, in that it means an increasingly dominant form of humor is one which eschews the audio-visual developments that dominated media in the twentieth century. Where that century’s comedy had to find ways to respond to media that foregrounded the image, the twenty-first century appears to be returning to the written word as its primary comic means.

COMIC FORM

As the range of examples referred to above shows, comic form has repeatedly mutated in response to the forms of technologies that have been used to disseminate it. The ability to reach mass audiences has enabled comedy to become a tool for

cultural normalization, and this has drawn criticism in terms of stereotyping categories such as gender and race. Given that for much of the twentieth century media forms such as radio, television, and cinema were controlled by a relatively small number of institutions with a goal of reaching as large a number of people as possible, comedy's forms can be seen to be a response to this aim of finding a common comic ground acceptable to a broad base. The splintering of audiences via newer distribution methods—such as social media—has removed this goal; or, more accurately, has enabled a broader variety of comic forms to sit alongside the more “mainstream” fodder. Whether this enables contemporary comedy to fulfil its social role of troubling and critiquing societal norms remains up for debate, as the wider range of comic matter enabled by newer forms of media only has meaning if it reaches audiences for whom such humor is not the norm. The mass conversation enabled by media in the mid-twentieth century may be being replaced only by multiple smaller-scale conversations, each of which is only engaged with by those for whom such humor is pleasurable.

What the history of comedy form in the twentieth and twenty-first century shows is the persistent ability of humor to reshape itself in response to contexts outside itself. This has occurred in terms of content as well as form. But perhaps the most significant shift is the normalization of the idea that comedy can have consequences in the real world, and that what it offers up to be laughed at matters. Comedy is not “just” a joke; its forms are expressions of dominant ideologies and discourses that can be troubled by humor, but might also be upheld by it. Its content—particularly when disseminated by mass media—polices “inclusion and exclusion” (Kessel 2012: 11). While the ways in which this occurs have typically been examined via content, it is clear that form plays a role here, too. For example, the longer narratives of cinema can allow for complex interrelationships of character and comedy that might open up spaces for progressive depictions: in opposition, the brevity of a tweet can make difficult such nuance, and therefore necessitate comedy that draws on simplified ideas. However, Twitter's ability to enable debate between users might itself open up a space for comic negotiation and back-and-forth that is impossible within the one-directional nature of film consumption. As the range of examples explored here shows, humor has an energetic propensity to attach itself to a range of forms and genres, refusing to remain static in terms of content or form. It is this multiplicity that best defines comic form, given it is a mode that has seamlessly wedded itself to and capitalized upon the technological and social changes that have occurred over the last century. To define comic form, then, requires acknowledgment of its refusal to adopt any kind of stable form at all.

CHAPTER TWO

Theory

PETER BUSE

INTRODUCTION

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was notorious for playing the clown, once said that in comedy, something always *escapes* (1992: 314). He could just as well have said that something of the comic always escapes comic theory. Or, that comic theory always runs behind comic practice. How far behind is a matter for debate. According to Jan Hokenson, “it still seems to take over fifty years for comic writers’ discoveries and conceptual shifts to reach the thresholds of critical theory” (2006: 173). This chapter will ask whether the twentieth century was when comic theory finally caught up with comic practices. The answer will be that it certainly tried, but that it is a race that cannot be won, for, as Agnes Heller believes, comic practices are simply too heterogeneous to be captured within any single theory (2005: 4–15). Keeping in mind that every theory of comedy that claims to encompass all things comic is bound to have left something out, this chapter will outline some of the most influential comic theories and theorists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In doing so, it will examine theorists on their own terms, spelling out key ideas, but also consider what aspects of the comic tradition they emphasize and what aspects they put to one side.

The chapter begins by examining the comic theorists who drew on James Frazer’s anthropology in their search for the origins of Greek tragedy, and rediscovered the ritual basis of the comic in communal celebration. To do this, the chapter reaches back into the decade prior to the period it officially covers in order to outline the thought of Francis MacDonald Cornford, a crucial influence on C. L. Barber and others, as well as a lightning rod for those who

rejected the ritualist tradition. The height of this tradition will be considered in the case of Northrop Frye and his re-creative theories of comedy in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). It will be argued that this theory gained longstanding currency and “universal” applicability, partly through Frye’s exclusion of Attic drama and medieval traditions. While Frye, a neo-Aristotelian, continued to subscribe to the superiority theory, the next section of the chapter will address the flourishing, from the 1960s, of populist theories of the comic that were inspired by or coincided with the works of Mikhail Bakhtin, especially *Rabelais and His World* ([1965] 1968). Although Bakhtin pre-dates Frye, the influence of his ideas, particularly the carnivalesque, proved a turning point for comic theory after Frye, not just in the attention Bakhtin paid to the medieval traditions that Frye neglected. The chapter will note the directions taken along the path established by Bakhtin in the work of Charney and Gurewitch, but also the new vistas opened up by a return to Aristophanes and the disorderly Attic drama in the case of Torrance in *The Comic Hero* (1978), as well as Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theorizing of the “signifyin(g)” practices of African American trickster figures. From there, the chapter will move to consider politically inspired contestations of comic theory by feminist thinkers, and the Marxist critique of mass culture as mere “medicinal” fun (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 112).

The elusiveness of comedy’s essence did not deter those specialists in essences, the philosophers, from trying their hands at pinning the comic butterfly to the wall in this period. Although the most important twentieth-century philosopher of the comic, Henri Bergson, is dealt with in the theory chapter of the previous volume, his presence continues to be felt here, especially with the importance given to the resilience, the insistence, and the sheer exuberance of “life” in the comic. Susanne Langer’s *Feeling and Form* (1953) is an important bridge between the populist and philosophical positions, abandoning as it does the superiority theory and opening the way to the vitality of the comic hero. Probably the most influential of the philosophers addressed in this section is John Morreall, whose three-part division of comic theories—superiority, incongruity, and relief—has provided a useful, if perhaps overused, shorthand for many who followed. The “relief” part of Morreall’s schema refers mainly to Sigmund Freud, who, like Bergson, is handled in a previous volume. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* ([1905] 1976), Freud professed himself poorly qualified to speak about the comic, which he strictly separated from jokes and humor. This has not prevented theorists of the comic, psychoanalytic, and otherwise from taking up Freud’s joke book as comic theory, if only to dismiss its contribution to comic theory. Post-Freudian theorists of the comic to be considered here include Ernst Kris, Eric Bentley, and Alenka Zupančič.

This chapter will argue that the way that one theorizes about comedy and the comic often depends on what one includes or excludes, what one counts as

comedy. While much of this chapter's emphasis is on comic theory which focuses on comedy as a genre, as a narrative form, it does not limit itself to this, and it extends to the comic as a mode more generally. It does, however, draw a line there, not venturing into the heterogeneous field of humor studies or the rich literature on games and play. Nor does it take up at any length the various theories of laughter expounded in the twentieth century, except where they refer to the comic specifically, not least because, as Anca Parvulescu puts it, "there is no stable relation between laughter and comedy" (2017: 507), or as Elder Olson says, we only identify the two with each other because of a "tendency to associate an effect with its most frequent cause" (1968: 11). The line is perhaps drawn arbitrarily, but it had to be drawn somewhere.

RITUAL, HOLIDAY, MYTHOS

Strictly speaking, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914) is just a little too early for this volume, but its influence is so pervasive on what follows that it needs to be treated here. In it, Francis Cornford argues that the key to understanding the meaning and origin of Aristophanic comedy lies in a plot pattern that is found in all the plays. He observes that "underlying the plots of a whole series of comedies on very diverse themes, we can distinctly make out the framework of a regular series of incidents. The hypothesis is that these form the moments in a ritual procedure" (1914: 93). The regular series of incidents is composed of *Agon* (or contest), *Sacrifice*, *Feast*, *Marriage*, and *Komos* (or procession), punctuated by one or more direct addresses to the audience by the Chorus in the *parabasis*. The ritual procedure embedded in this structure is the death of an old King (or God) and the rise of a new one. So, for example, *The Knights* (424 BCE) is not just a scabrous secular satire on Athenian politics and social life, in which a low-born sausage-seller, Agoracritus, defeats the pompous and corrupt Cleon in his influence over an old man representing the people (Demos), but underlying this plot is the rejuvenation of that very Demos through the action of the play. When Agoracritus boils Demos like a piece of meat near the end, it is not just another absurd and amusing incident, but the birth of a new Demos, capped by a feast and celebration.

One of the reasons that Cornford found in Old Comedy the theme of the death and rebirth of a king was that he was looking for it. He was looking for it because it was a theme central to the work of the academic group to which he belonged, the Cambridge Classical Anthropologists, or Cambridge Ritualists, consisting of Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, A. B. Cook, Cornford, and others. The group was inspired by the anthropology of James Frazer, who, in *The Golden Bough* (1890), argued that many ancient religions were unified by myths and rites of fertility and the worship and sacrifice of a sacred king. Just as Frazer had found the death and resurrection of a king in many religions and

myths, so the Cambridge Ritualists detected this pattern in the literary and dramatic works of classical cultures. They determined that tragic action was rooted in ritual forms rather than derived from earlier dramatic or literary models, with the stages of ritual becoming stages in the plot of tragedy.

Tragedy, then, was by far the main focus of the Cambridge group, and after Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) and Murray's *Euripides and his Age* (1913), Cornford's *Origin of Attic Comedy* was a comparative afterthought. Cornford nevertheless brought new light to the Old Comedy, particularly through his emphasis on the usually neglected endings of the plays, with their feasts and marriages, and their processions that echoed ritual phallic processions, and in one case—*The Acharnians* (425 BCE)—reproduced one directly. In doing so, he finds elements of renewal and celebration where Aristotle, for so long the main authority on the subject, found mainly derision. So, where Aristotle noted the satire and invective that accompanied the phallic procession, Cornford argued that these processions were “intended to secure the fertility of the earth and of man and beast” (1914: 53); and in the impostor figure (*alazon*) he espied a sacrificial scapegoat who “bears upon his head . . . the sins and evils of his people” (1914: 151). The *parabasis*, meanwhile, that piece of Brechtian direct address *avant la lettre*, may have gradually disappeared from Aristophanes, Cornford claims, because “it has all the air of a piece of ritual awkwardly interrupting the course of the play” (1914: 122).

Cornford builds his arguments on a detailed close reading of the eleven extant plays of Aristophanes, and so roots his thesis in a specific oeuvre. At various points, though, he hints at the wider applicability of his model. For example, he tells us that the “popular tradition of ribaldry and personal invective” found in Aristophanes may have been gradually purged from comedy in the fourth century BCE, but that its analogues can be found in the medieval Feast of Fools, the *compagnies des fous* and the *confreries des sots* (1914: 45). Later, he even suggests that aspects of the ritual *agon*—sacrifice and feast—can be found in Punch and Judy shows (1914: 144). Indeed, for the sufficiently determined, the residues of ritual can be traced in the most unlikely places. For example, could it not be argued that Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) features a sacrifice (of the fictional Bunbury), feasts (the devouring of muffins and cucumber sandwiches), and the death and rebirth of the fantastical “Ernest”? Even if it is the case that the classically educated Wilde was perfectly equipped to produce such mock ritual, such applications show the limits of the universalizing approach: Frazer in particular came under much criticism for bringing heterogeneous cultures under the sway of a single myth.

On firmer ground among the inheritors of Cornford is C.L. Barber, whose *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959) does not universalize, but seeks the patterns of Shakespeare's middle comedies in Elizabethan cultural forms. Where for Cornford the key concept was “ritual,” for Barber it is “holiday.”

The “social form of Elizabethan holidays,” he says, “contributed to the dramatic form of festive comedy” (1959: 4). “Festive comedy” is the term that Barber applies to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and the Falstaff episodes in *Henry IV*. All comedy is festive he claims, but these plays by Shakespeare are especially so. Pagan and Saturnalian traditions may have been waning in Shakespeare’s time, especially in the cities where theater flourished, but they found a second theatrical life on the Elizabethan stage. This is evident in the titles of the plays, which allude to festive parts of the calendar (midsummer, Twelfth Night) even if they do not represent them directly, and in direct references, such as Rosalind’s playful line in *As You Like It*, that “I am in a holiday humor, and like enough to consent”; or in Theseus’ speculation that the youth of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* “rose up early to observe/ The rite of May,” an allusion to the May games, which celebrated fertility, growth, and the change of seasons.

One of Shakespeare’s most striking comic borrowings from festive traditions was the Lord of Misrule, embodied in Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*, and especially Sir John Falstaff in the two parts of *Henry IV* and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The Lord of Misrule was a sort of mock king who commanded temporarily at Christmas feasting, overseeing a period of license and disorder: gambling, drinking, masques, and mummeries. In Falstaff, Barber tells us, Shakespeare “fused the clown’s part with that of the festive celebrant,” thus integrating theatrical and holiday conventions (1959: 13). Falstaff also provides Barber with his more general formula for the pattern of festive comedy: “clowning could provide both release for impulses which run counter to decency and decorum, and the clarification about limits which comes from going beyond the limit” (1959: 13). Falstaff’s drunkenness, his bragging and swaggering, his jokes, all allow for expression of “impulses” normally condemned, and in the end they *are* condemned: in the comic mode, decorum must be restored and limits clarified. “Through release to clarification” is in fact Barber’s four-word summary of what happens in all these comedies, and by association in all comedy: a period of license and disorder, followed by a clarification of rules and limits. In other words, not only does comedy borrow from and allude to Saturnalian traditions, but in many ways *enacts* the same rhythms as those traditions.

Barber limits himself to Shakespeare’s middle comedies: the festive allusions and Saturnalian patterns are less evident in the comedies that precede and follow this sequence, and the formula of “release through to clarification” sits uneasily with a play such as *Measure for Measure*, in which the release seems less benign and the “clarification” is unpalatable and far from clear. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Shakespeare’s sequence of “festive” plays provides a blueprint for much of what is now known as romantic comedy, in which conjugal union is the outcome of the chaotic disruptions unleashed by love. To

take just one example, we could see the pattern at work in the Hollywood comedy *The Philadelphia Story* (dir. George Cukor 1940), which is set in the country estate of a rich socialite family at a time of festivity: the wedding of the daughter of the estate, the tellingly named Tracy Lord (Katherine Hepburn), and the rich upstart, George Kittredge (John Howard). Into this situation enters a Lord of Misrule in the shape of the heavy drinking first husband Dexter Haven (Cary Grant), who enables the entrance into the closed community of a class outsider, the reporter Mike Connor (James Stewart). "Release" comes amid drunkenness as Tracy threatens to pair off with Mike and so destabilize the class hierarchies, but in the end does not. "Clarification" comes with Tracy reunited with Dexter, whose apparent cynicism about the institution of marriage dissolves just in time. Strict social hierarchy is essential to the plotting, with the ultimate exclusion of class outsiders (George and Mike) and the reincorporation of the Lord of Misrule, who is always an insider. The model is thus still effective where social hierarchies are a given, and harmony the outcome, but by no means is this the case in all comedies.

The case that comedy is in its essence harmonious was most successfully made by the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye, the most influential mid-twentieth-century theorist of comedy, and of genre more generally. Frye made his major contribution on the subject before Barber, but is taken here after because of the greater distance he marks from Cornford. The distance is greater, even if Frye invokes ritual, because Frye's analysis of comedy is further removed from the anthropological data and makes much stronger claims for the universal applicability of his thesis. This thesis was outlined in two key publications, the short essay "The Argument of Comedy" ([1948] 1964), and the chapter "The mythos of Spring" in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). By "argument," Frye really means plot, but by using the former term he implies that there is a certain logic to the comic plot, and that it proceeds through a series of reliable statements and propositions. At the same time, it sits alongside three other plots or arguments in the canons of literary genre: romance (summer), tragedy (autumn), and irony (winter). The genres in their turn align with phases in the life of an individual: comedy and birth, romance and youth, tragedy and maturity, irony and death. So, where Cornford and Barber start with *cultural* phenomena, some of which are connected to the seasons, and show how comic conventions are derived from them, Frye loosens the link to culture, starting with comic conventions, and deriving from them a set of *natural* rhythms.

That comedy is somehow natural suggests that it is also inevitable and comes about organically. It is therefore doubly significant what Frye takes to be the natural plots of comedy, and what he leaves aside. Noting that "Old Comedy . . . was out of date before Aristophanes himself was dead," Frye claims that "when we speak of comedy, we normally think of something that derives from

the Menandrine tradition" ([1948] 1964: 450). The Greek New Comedy of Menander was inherited by the Roman comic playwrights Plautus and Terence, and it is from these two that Frye sources the fundamental argument of comedy. This argument has a "regular wish-fulfilment pattern" modeled on the "Oedipus situation" in which a young male lover encounters an obstacle, usually an older man, in his love for a young woman ([1948] 1964: 450). The overcoming of the obstacle coincides with the defeat of a father by a son, sometimes symbolically, sometimes literally. This mildly Freudian scenario shows its actual roots in Jungian psychoanalysis in Frye's investment in character and plot typology. He identifies, for instance, a basic conflict at the heart of comedy between the figures of the *alazon* (imposter) and the *eiron* (ironist), with victory generally guaranteed to the latter. It is a conflict that has been reworked by Harry Levin as the "eternal opposition" between playboys who just want to have fun, and killjoys who "cannot make a joke; they cannot take a joke; they cannot see the joke; they spoil the game" (1987: 38). The *agelast* or killjoy, Frye says, "is usually someone with a good deal of social prestige and power, who is able to force much of the play's society into line with his obsession . . . The society emerging at the conclusion of comedy represents, by contrast, a kind of moral norm, or pragmatically free society" (1987: 169). For Frye, then, comedy has a socially cohesive function, not only punishing the immoral, but also delivering a more perfect society at its conclusion.

That Frye's model works is undeniable, just as it is undeniable that it is a partial model. The extent of its success can be seen in the range of objections it has produced, objections that were almost inevitable from the moment of Frye's opening paragraph in "The mythos of Spring," when he makes a bold claim for a comic structure that has remained unchanged over 2,500 years, adding, with a rhetorical flourish, that "the audiences at vaudeville, comic strips, and television programs still laugh at the jokes that were declared to be outworn at the opening of *The Frogs*" (1957: 163). Even though in this case Frye places Aristophanes at the beginning of an unbroken comic arc, he largely ignored the fantastical and obscene elements of Attic comedy (see Hokenson 2006: 90). It is an entirely wholesome version of comedy that wants nothing to do with what Edith Kern, developing an idea of Baudelaire's, has called "the absolute comic," which is to say, comedy in its farcical and grotesque guises. So attached is he to harmony, Kern claims, that "[o]ne might say that Frye's definition omits the comic" (1980: 24). As for the recurrent comic struggle between fathers and sons, playboys and killjoys, it is part of what Jan Hokenson calls a "a basso plain-chant around the theoretical figures of butts and heroes as exclusively masculine, as indisputably and rightly male as the gaze of the pure theorist" (2006: 132–3). In other words, by rooting comic "rhythms" in the supposed rhythms of nature, Frye at the same time naturalized social and gender relations that are anything but natural.

BAKHTIN AND AFTER: CARNIVAL, THE BODY, THE COMIC HERO

Cornford, Barber, and Frye were by no means identical in their outlooks, but as well as a joint interest in ritual, they were all firmly Aristotelian in their theorizing of comedy. This can be seen in their emphasis on structure and privileging of plot (*mythos* in Aristotle) over other aspects of the comic, and in their shared assumption that comedy is basically satirical, that it represents human weakness in characters inferior to its audience. The focus on plot meant that these theorists favored dramatic comedy as a genre, at the expense of other modes of comic performance, for example, modes that interrupted dramatic narrative or that were not narrative-based at all. Cornford argued that the endings of Aristophanes' plays had been unjustly neglected, but it could be said that he and Barber and Frye drew far too many of their conclusions based on how comedies concluded. Barber's "clarification of limits" and Frye's establishment of a "moral norm" at the end of each comedy signal their endorsement of the dim view Aristotle takes of the more excessive actions of comic characters. For them, comedy remains potentially "corrective" in its aims.

The next major wave of twentieth-century theorists of the comic swung the balance in the other direction. At their head was the Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose *Rabelais and His World* was first finished in 1940 as a doctoral thesis, but only published in 1965 in Russian, and in English translation in 1968, with an immediate impact and influence across a number of fields, including comic theory. The book is a study of the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais' novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–4), which relates the adventures of the two eponymous giants, father and son. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais draws for his tales on an endlessly rich medieval folk culture of "humorous forms and manifestations opposed to the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture," including "comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody" ([1965] 1968: 4). Bakhtin appears to start from the same sort of anthropological material as the Cambridge Ritualists and Barber and Frye, but where Cornford and his colleagues found a unitary culture, Bakhtin writes of a fundamentally fissured one, and where Frye and Barber emphasized redemption and reconciliation, Bakhtin focused on comic disruption and subversion.

Official medieval culture, according to Bakhtin, was petty and closed, hierarchical and rigid, serious and monological, while folk culture emerged from the public marketplace, was destructive of hierarchies, playful and dialogical, and above all marked by laughter. And not just any laughter, but "a laughter of all the people . . . directed at all and everyone" (Bakhtin [1965]

1968: 11). Not a laughter of one group at another, but a laughter that embraces everyone in its range: the laughter of *carnival*, in absolute opposition to the sobriety of official culture. At his doctoral defense, and ever since, the absoluteness of Bakhtin's opposition of official and folk culture has been called into question (Pan'kov 2001: 47), while the abstraction of his idea of carnival "has annoyed social historians for decades" (Hirschkop 2001: 21). But this is almost beside the point. What matters is how Bakhtin opened to inspection medieval cultural forms that were generally derided or ignored, how he made visible the traces of carnival and folk culture in literature of later epochs, and in general how *productive* his ideas of carnival and the carnivalesque became for literary critics.

The dialog between carnival and literary fiction in Rabelais was dubbed "grotesque realism" by Bakhtin. Of greatest interest to comic theory in grotesque realism is the place it gives to the body. While official culture would have us imagine the human body as dignified or restrained, or not have us think of it at all, in carnival the body is exuberantly expressive. It is a gluttonous body, a body of enormous appetites that consumes voraciously through indecorous and gaping jaws. It is a body that farts and shits and pisses, that is uncontrolled and uncontrollable in its emissions and secretions. In Rabelais, this body is not closed off, but abundantly open to other bodies and to the world, marked by its "convexities and orifices" (Bakhtin [1965] 1968: 317) an "ever unfinished . . . ever creating body" ([1965] 1968: 26). This grotesque body challenges the sobriety and formality of official culture by seeing the world from "the standpoint of the guts or genitals" (Eagleton 2001: 229).

Just as laughter in Bakhtin is collective, so the body in carnival does not belong to any one individual, but is the people's body, "grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable" ([1965] 1968: 19). Does this make it a comic body? Certainly, it has been argued that much postmodern fiction is comic and *carnivalesque*, and that its bodies challenge conventional corporeal standards. Take for example, the protagonist of Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), the giant "Dog Woman" who could have stepped straight out of Rabelais. Her mouth is large enough to hold a dozen oranges at once, she is covered in scars inhabited by fleas, and she has disgusting rotting teeth. She strides her way through this semi-historical novel, brushing aside the ideal of a tiny, perfected, feminine body. The same could be said of female bodies in the blood-spattered comic-gothic novels and short stories of Angela Carter, or of the desiring, incontinent ones in the fiction of Salman Rushdie or David Foster Wallace, all inheritors in one way or other of the Rabelaisian tradition.

As Matthew Bevis notes, comedy has always thrived on scatological and animal energies that show the human body "as a site of competing impulses" (2013: 24). However, we should not assume that just because comedy draws on stumbling, stuttering, and leaking bodies, that all comedy is carnivalesque in the

Bakhtinian sense. As Stallybrass and White note about Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), the comedy may be set in the public square, but the representation is detached, with the author an "isolated judge standing in opposition to the vulgar throng" (1986: 67). Along the same lines, the American film genre of "gross-out" comedy might seem promisingly named from a Bakhtinian perspective, and without doubt much of its comic success derives from the bodily improprieties of its characters. But the body in "gross-out" is not the body of carnival, not a body whose workings and excesses are a source of communal delight. Instead, when genitals are trapped half in and half out of a zipper in *There's Something About Mary* (dir. Peter and Bobby Farrelly 1998), or when laxatives cause uncontrollable diarrhea in *American Pie* (dir. Paul and Chris Weitz 1999), the comic effect is based on shame and humiliation, not delight. "Gross-out" is therefore on the side of the bourgeois propriety that Bakhtin precisely sought to contest. A rather different conclusion might be drawn about the earlier "bad taste" comedies of American director John Waters, whose gallery of grotesques are entirely unencumbered by shame.

Bakhtinian carnival resonated strongly with American theorists of comedy in the immediate aftermath of 1960s counterculture, when distrust of "official culture" was at its peak. Although critics such as Gurewitch, Charney, and Torrance were hardly fully signed up Bakhtinians, much of what Bakhtin proposed chimed with their desire to find in comedy something other than a corrective, and in the comic hero something other than a butt. They also detected a strong note of rebellion in comedy, a view that shared much with the irrepressible grotesque body in Bakhtin's carnival. In *Comedy: The Irrational Vision*, Gurewitch rejected the "unitary, ritual, festive, resurrectional transcendental bias" (1975: 18–19) of Cornford and Frye, and as his book's title indicates, argued that the main thrust of comedy is an out-and-out attack on reason. With echoes of Bakhtin, but filtered through Freud (or Wilhelm Reich's Freud), he celebrates farce in particular,

[a]s the most lawless and lunatic of the arts—it unleashes into the drawing rooms of civilization the happy beasts of sexuality, aggression, scatology, cynicism, nonsense, and madness—farce, with incomparable outrageousness, helps man abjure social discipline . . . That is why the farceur, that natural enemy of the saint, the sobersides, and the good citizen, is the darling of the id and the thaumaturge of psychological primitivism.

—Gurewitch 1975: 130

The opponents of comedy—the saint, the sobersides, the good citizen—remind us of Bakhtin's representatives of official culture, but for Gurewitch they are not dissolved in a collective laughter of the people so much as obliterated by a frenzied desublimation.

In *Comedy High and Low*, Charney echoes this view, saying that comedy is “an expression of irrational, unsocialized, chaotic, and wish-fulfilment impulses” (1978: x), and arguing that we cannot understand the workings of formal stage comedy (high) without examining the ways that it is in dialog with the comedy of the street (low). Charney is wary of speaking on behalf of *all* comedy and is refreshingly candid about his preference for certain types of comedy (W.C. Fields features heavily, as does sexual innuendo), and from these preferences derives his conclusive chapter on comic characters, whom he unequivocally rescues from shame, humiliation, and any possibility of improvement or correction. Briskly dismissing comic traditions of “satiric ridicule,” he boldly claims that the comic hero of the sort he favors “engages in relentless guerilla warfare with society” (1978: 171). It is a logic that is enthusiastically extended in *The Comic Hero* by Robert M. Torrance. For Torrance, the comic hero’s “primordial values and elemental needs . . . continually smash the prevailing order to smithereens” (1978: 40), an insurrectionary drive he sees in the protagonists of Aristophanes, in Odysseus, in the Good Soldier Schweik, and in Charlie Chaplin among others. Like Gurewitch and Charney, Torrance refuses to see the comic character as the butt of ridicule, and instead paints him (almost always him) as protean, forever eluding capture by the killjoys:

Conclusion, like definition, is antithetical to the comic hero, whose fugitive nature will not abide formulation. Even so, we may reasonably affirm that his essence lies in being at once heroic and comic. Comic not primarily because he is laughed at but because—in the root sense of *kômos*—he celebrates life, of body and mind. He can never wholly relinquish the joy in living that is both his innate disposition and his final object, and he perpetually solemnizes existence by willfully refusing to see it as solemn.

—1978: 274

What is perhaps most striking about these American reworkings of the riotous energies of carnival is the way in which they re-individualize in the solitary comic hero what in Bakhtin is a force that precisely does away with the boundaries between bodies and individuals. In this manner, the ritual *kômos* is reinvigorated for the high-spirited *and* entrepreneurial.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. gives the comic hero another inflection in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). Gates traces the African American tradition of monkey tales back to the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara. This trickster figure survived the Middle Passage to take a distinctly American form in tales in which a clever monkey, through what Gates calls “signifyin(g),” tricks a gullible lion into painful encounters with an elephant. The monkey has a skill with the ambiguities and doublings of language that escapes the lion and elephant, who are gulled into violence, a violence that

eventually returns on the monkey, who is punished, but survives to signify another day. It is a principle that extends far beyond this series of comic tales, with the strategies of the Signifying Monkey—"ever punning, ever troping" (Gates 1988: 52)—saturating African American vernacular discourse. The monkey "is a hero of black myth, a sign of the triumph of wit and reason" (1988: 77), and the tales are "versions of daydreams, the Daydream of the Black Other, chiasitic fantasies of reversal of power relationships" (1988: 59). The practices and styles of this comic-heroic monkey make their way into the African American literary tradition, represented as black vernacular speech in the writings of, for example, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Ishmael Reed, but also informing the "signifyin(g)" style of the writing itself.

COMIC POLITICS

Writing at the height of the Cold War, Robert Torrance suggested that "the dissident comic hero" is an endangered species, but more needed than ever in the face of the "collectivist twentieth century" (1978: 276). Representing the "collectivist" camp, Marxist critics Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer offered a rather less celebratory account of comic phenomena in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002), composed during a period of exile in California. In close proximity to Hollywood, they had plenty of opportunity to see first-hand the products of American mass culture and to experience the workings of what they came to call the "culture industry." Film, magazines, and music under capitalism mutilate and standardize, manufacturing a false and inauthentic need in their consumers. Although the products of the culture industry promise amusement and entertainment, escape from daily troubles, what they in fact provide for their audiences is an image of their own oppression returned to them in an inverted form. Here is a typically acerbic passage about animated film from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

The jollity dispels the joy supposedly conferred by the sight of an embrace and postpones satisfaction until the day of the pogrom. To the extent that cartoons do more than accustom the senses to the new tempo, they hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous attrition, the breaking of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate victim in real life receive their beatings so that the spectators can accustom themselves to theirs.

—Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002: 110

Laughing at Donald Duck's misfortunes, the spectators are unaware that they are laughing at their own impoverished experience under advanced

capitalism. For Adorno and Horkheimer, laughter under these conditions cannot be anything but barbaric. They do not rule out the possibility of a carnivalesque communal laughter in the Bakhtinian vein, but it is not to be found in mass culture, nor does laughter in this setting possess the force Bergson attributed to it, a vitality that bursts through rigidity. Instead, laughter is a symptom of alienation and Donald Duck and his companions are an ideological sugar-coating of material conditions: "Fun is a medicinal bath," Adorno and Horkheimer say, "which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness" ([1944] 2002: 112). One wonders what Adorno and Horkheimer would have made of *Arsenic and Old Lace* (dir. Frank Capra 1944), the hit Hollywood comedy released the year their book was published, in which Abby and Martha Brewster administer a "medicine" of strychnine, arsenic, and cyanide to itinerant elderly bachelors in order to alleviate their "suffering."

The German playwright Bertolt Brecht was less gloomy than his compatriots (and sometime acquaintances) Adorno and Horkheimer and proposed another outlet for laughter and the comic theater. Perhaps more influential as a theorist than as a practitioner, Brecht called the dominant theatrical conventions of his day "illusionist" and critiqued them for their efforts to create empathy or identification between the audience and the characters on the stage. Empathy was toxic for political action because it left audiences accepting of what they saw rather than questioning and thinking. To counteract this passivity, he sought to generate *Verfremdungseffekts*, or "distancing-effects," through a series of techniques that broke up the illusion of a play. These included direct address to the audience, interruptions of the narrative with jokes and song, and episodic, discontinuous plotting. Brecht did not invent any of these elements himself, but borrowed them from existing theatrical traditions, mainly popular comic forms such as vaudeville and music hall, but also Shakespeare and older comedy: for example, the direct address to the audience can be traced back to the *parabasis* in the Greek Old Comedy. This is not to say that Brecht was writing comedies. His theater was "epic" theater, which we might call comedy with a difference, or comedy inverted. Where most playwrights would consider success an audience laughing when characters laugh and crying when they cry, Brecht aimed for the opposite: in epic theater "I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh" (1978: 71). Such a reaction is the genuine sign of an audience thinking rather than being caught up in the lures of identification or drawn into the satisfying and numbing medicinal bath of entertainment.

The tension in Marxist theory between critiquing comedy and finding new ways to deploy its techniques can also be seen in feminist thinking about the comic. The stakes were set out in two major books of the 1990s: Susan Carlson's *Women and Comedy* (1991) and Frances Gray's *Women and Laughter* (1994). Carlson and Gray both ask us to look again, from the perspective of women, at

comic traditions and at comic theorizing. They prompt us to ask, for example, do the ritual plots of comedy as outlined by Cornford, Barber, and Frye operate in the same way for women as they do for men? Does the experience of the comic hero celebrated by Charney and Torrance look the same if the comic character is a woman? Have the most influential theorists of comedy asked themselves these questions when setting out their theories? The answer in each case is a resounding “no.” The redemptive and harmonious ritual ending of comedy in marriage may for women be a non-negotiable return to the status quo, rather than the inauguration of a new and freer society. Women take center-stage in comedy more than in other genres, but their place is usually strictly circumscribed, and they are consigned to being the butt of the joke: “the dumb blonde, the wisecracking tart, the naïve virgin, the dragon who doesn’t realize she is sexually past it” (Gray 1994: 9). As for the theorists, “misogyny is inscribed into some definitions, and where this is not so there is a bland assumption that the experience of both sexes is identical” (1994: 13–14). It is not that women have been absent from comedy as characters or writers or performers, but that another history exists and has rarely been told. Carlson and Gray place special emphasis on new developments in women’s and feminist comedy in the 1970s and 1980s, but only after they have shown the gendered conventions of laughter and comedy established over a long period. Carlson concentrates on British stage comedy stretching back to the Renaissance, while Gray focuses on television sitcom in the United States and Britain, and on women performers in vaudeville and stand-up in those two countries.

Carlson opens her book with four studies of strong and attractive women in comedies written by men: Rosalind in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Millamant in Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700), Julia in Shaw’s *The Philanderer* (1898), and Susan in Ayckbourn’s *Woman in Mind* (1985). Each of these plays, Carlson argues, is based structurally around a pattern of inversion ending in marriage, in which “women’s liberation in comedy’s middle is qualified and women’s joy in marriage is forced” (1991: 2). In the case of *The Way of the World*, Congreve has created in Millamant a “woman whose intellectual and moral allure outweighs her follies and faults” (1991: 69), a character who is the play’s “single most commanding presence” (1991: 75), and whose wit is a match for any man’s. The crowning of Millamant’s part is usually taken to be the tour-de-force “proviso” scene where she lays out her conditions for marriage with Mirabell, conditions that he concedes to entirely. However, Carlson reads the scene against the grain, seeing Millamant’s “temporary dominance as a prelude to more permanent subservience” (1991: 84), for what the proviso clearly shows is how much Millamant stands to lose in marriage, and Mirabell, after all, needs no such proviso to guarantee *his* liberties after marriage. What is more, Carlson notes another movement in the play, one that isolates Millamant from other women and undermines the possibility of a mode of

social organization based on female friendship and solidarity. This possibility is openly referred to by Mirabell and Fainall at the start of the play as the “cabal” of women, from which they are excluded as men. The play ensures that the “cabal” comes to nought, and that women’s most important relationships are not with each other, but with men. When Carlson comes in the second half of her book to comedy written and produced by women, one of her main interests is the ways in which it represents and enacts the sort of community and solidarity that *The Way of the World* does not allow.

Gray opens her book by considering the commonly held view, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that women lack a sense of humor: “like barrenness,” she quips, “it’s assumed to be primarily a woman’s problem” (1994: 5). Humor, she goes on to show, is not a zero-sum game, but contingent and context-specific. The situations in which women are most often accused of being humorless are the occasions when they are the butt of the joke in which power relations are asymmetrical. That is, they are accused of failing to laugh at their own exploitation when it is joked about by the beneficiaries of that exploitation. At the same time, when women do joke about such matters, the dominant culture is often deaf to their humor. Gray gives as an example the feminist practice in the 1970s of bra-burning, so often taken as an example of humorlessness, when in fact it was a playful parodying of (masculine) political anger that resorts to burning the enemy in effigy.

In the rest of her book, Gray shows how women comics have skillfully negotiated a field in which they are often expected not to be funny. Two striking examples that she gives from the mid-twentieth century are Marilyn Monroe and Lucille Ball. Monroe was consistently constrained in the strait-jacket of roles constructed for her by the studios, limited to some combination of sexual, innocent, and vacuous. Yet in spite of this, Monroe as comic performer succeeded in ironizing and undercutting the stereotype she was obliged to embody, through inflections of speech and movements of the eyes. Gray does not use the term, but she implies that Monroe was the classical *eirōn*: the knowing ironist who plays the fool. Unlike Monroe, Lucille Ball had much more control over the material she performed. The basic premise of her television series, *I Love Lucy*, was the mismatch between her idealized fantasy life and her incompetence in all things. In any given episode, this incompetence would thwart Lucy’s ambitions and her desires would be defeated. But as with Monroe, Lucy’s failures were the opportunity to demonstrate great skills in comic performance, working through the full array of vaudeville routines: the defeat of the character was the triumph of the performer.

In spite of this, Gray finishes on a cautious note: “Lucy isn’t her own woman; her triumphs are always partial, her power fragmented, her defeats always sanctioned by the narrative” (1994: 51). Lucille Ball’s most famous work pre-dates second-wave feminism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is this epoch

and the decades that followed that take up the latter part of Gray's book, in which she investigates the comic strategies of women in stand-up in the United States and Britain, tracing the threads that link Marie Lloyd and Gracie Fields to Victoria Wood and French and Saunders, and so establishing the longevity of traditions of women in comedy. Of this era she records the structural obstacles that still made stand-up an uneven playing field for the two genders, but also observes progress made, most notably the way on the alternative comedy scene "[s]ex ceased to be something that men did to women and became a complex area of experience yielding a rich variety of comic paradoxes" (1994: 156).

PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

One of the great strengths of Gray and Carlson as well as some of the other theorists considered thus far is the close attention they pay to different kinds of comic text: plays, films, novels, and performances are all examined with great care in the theorizing of the comic. So far we have heard from anthropologists, literary critics and literary theorists, Marxists, and feminists, but in this section we come finally to proper philosophers of comedy. What is striking about these philosophers is how little interest they seem to show in studying in detail actual comic texts. It is almost as if the rich and heterogeneous variety of comic practice gets in the way of philosophizing and it is best not to be distracted by it. As Lichtenberg puts it in a joke cited by Freud, inverting a famous line from *Hamlet*, "there is much . . . in philosophy that is not to be found in heaven or earth" (Freud [1905] 1976: 111). A philosopher likes nothing more than an argument, and might respond as follows to such an accusation: the literary critic, the anthropologist, the feminist, each acts as if he or she already knows what comedy or the comic is in its essence, because he or she confidently proceeds to analyze examples that are assumed from the outset to be representatives of this thing called comedy or the comic. But on what basis is this assumption made? If this basis is not secure, then is not the rest of the argument thrown into doubt? This is why the philosopher returns to fundamental questions rather than getting immediately drawn into the minutiae of comic phenomena.

One of the most significant philosophical interventions in the second half of the twentieth century is Susanne Langer's chapter on comedy in *Feeling and Form*. Langer overlaps with Frye and Barber in emphasizing comedy's rootedness in "spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings or initiations" (1953: 331), but she sees no need to temper festivity with morality. Instead, she says the essence of comedy is *life*, pure and simple, and that the great comic dramatists "have literally, 'no use' for moral principles" (1953: 345). In one of her few concrete examples, she cites the resilience and exuberance of clowns and comic buffoons, saying of the German Hans Wurst figure, "He is personified

élan vital . . . his whole improvised existence has the rhythm of primitive, savage, if not animalian life . . . genuinely amoral—now triumphant, now worsted and rueful, but in his ruefulness and dismay he is funny, because his energy is really unimpaired” (1953: 342). With this assessment of the clown, Langer abjures the supposedly corrective element in comedy, and with it suspends the superiority theory handed down generation to generation from Aristotle. She also employs Bergson’s vitalist language, but instead of the comic arising, as in Bergson, through a mechanical encrustation on life, the comic for Langer is life itself. Langer’s range of reference is very wide, taking in Greek Old and New Comedy, Molière, Dante, the Spanish Golden Age, and the “nataka” of the Indian subcontinent, but she only ever lightly sketches how her comic vitalism works in practice. This was left to writers such as Charney and Torrance, who also rejected the moral basis of comedy and embraced the irrepressible energies of the comic protagonist.

Like Langer, John Morreall’s concrete examples are relatively limited, but this has in no way impaired the influence of his philosophical studies, chief among them *Taking Laughter Seriously* (1983) and *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (2009). Although, as his titles suggest, Morreall’s interest is in laughter and humor more generally, he needs to be addressed here, because like Freud, his insights have been widely adopted as theories of comedy and the comic. Morreall begins both these investigations by testing the validity of what he takes to be the three main positions in the definition of humor and the comic: superiority (linked with Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes), incongruity (Kant and Schopenhauer), and relief (Spencer and Freud). He carefully identifies the gaps in each position and concludes that no existing theory is “comprehensive enough” (1983: 39). He is especially dismissive of Freud, whose theory he reduces to the idea that a joke allows its teller and audience to overcome an inhibition, ignoring entirely Freud’s careful linguistic analysis of the condensation and displacement that constitutes the “joke-work.” Leaving aside whether or not it is necessary or desirable to have a “comprehensive” theory, it is striking how Morreall’s own comprehensive theory more or less recapitulates the theory of incongruity: he concludes that humor and the comic are defined by a pleasant psychological “shift” (1983: 39–48), a “sudden change of mental state . . . that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously” (2009: xii). This is important because it places Morreall in general agreement with other thinkers since the 1960s (Bakhtin, Langer, Charney, Gurewitsch) in moving away from the foundational Aristotelian view. It is notable, however, that the concept of superiority makes a surreptitious return in the latter part of *Taking Laughter Seriously* in Morreall’s tribute to the intrinsic superiority of the humorous person. As has been noted above under feminist theory, such a blanket view overlooks the sociopolitical contingencies of comedy and humor. In *Comic*

Relief, Morreall takes a more rounded view, but nevertheless makes the case for a “positive ethics of humor” (2009: 112) in which humor cultivates intellectual and moral virtues.

A very different approach is taken by Dimitri Nikulin in *Comedy, Seriously: A Philosophical Study* (2014). Nikulin notes that since Plato, philosophy has for the most part distrusted or ignored comedy, even though Plato’s dialogues are themselves “subtly comic” (2014: 6). He takes this fact as a cue to argue that comedy is actually “the very dramatization of philosophical reasoning” (2014: vii). Focusing on the domestic comedies of the Roman playwright Terence, Nikulin treats the clever slave as a philosopher figure, slyly playing the fool, like Socrates, but all along *thinking* in a way that his master cannot. The master is in fact a slave to the comedy, because he is bound up by the twists and turns of the action, while the slave, formally unfree, is free to think. Thinking, for Nikulin, is essentially dialogic, and this is what makes comedy more philosophical than tragedy, which is oriented toward death and finitude, and tends toward the monological. So, not only is Nikulin dependent on a fairly strict opposition between comedy and tragedy, but he favors a particular sort of sunny comedy when he claims that “Characters in comedy worked toward a good ending, even if they often lacked an understanding of their actions. By acting with others toward a good ending, comedy allowed for the individual’s realization of human being as comic co-being, that is, as being in dialog with others” (2014: 95). Within relatively narrow definitions of comedy and of philosophy, then, Nikulin can conclude that comedy is philosophical, and philosophy comical.

Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai observe that many thinkers on comedy reserve the right to distinguish between “true” and “false” comedy, a “conflation of taste with ontology” (2017: 241) that allows them to put to one side examples that do not fit their theory. Susanne Langer, for instance, says that a “Real comedy” is one that “sets up in its audience a sense of general exhilaration”; John Morreall approves of Jackie Gleason and Art Carney in *The Honeymooners*, but thinks most TV sitcoms are “pitifully childish” (1983: 10); and Nikulin, like so many before him, excludes Aristophanes from the outset. One of the thinkers that Berlant and Ngai mention is Alenka Zupančič, whose *The Odd One In* (2008) is the first sustained attempt at a Lacanian theory of comedy. This is not to say that there were not attempts before Zupančič to bring psychoanalysis and comedy together, starting with Chapter 7 of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in which Freud admits, “[i]t is only with misgivings that I venture to approach the problem of the comic itself” ([1905] 1976: 248). After Freud, ego psychologist Ernst Kris (1964) found that in comedy the ego, in the shape of the protagonist, usually negotiates successfully the chastisements of the superego and the demands of the id; while literary critics such as Gurewitch and Eric Bentley lean more heavily toward comedy as a field in

which the id runs rampant. Bentley in particular picks up this thread with great gusto, arguing that “Like dreams, farces show the disguised fulfillment of repressed wishes . . . mainly, if not exclusively, desires to damage the family” (1958: x). The Oedipal dimensions of comedy were explored at greater length by Charles Mauron in his monograph *Psychocritique du genre comique* (1964).

Oedipus does not come into the picture for Zupančič, who extrapolates from a few fleeting and scattered references to comedy in the texts of Jacques Lacan. Her narrow range of dramatic examples reflects the comedies commented on by Lacan (mainly Plautus and Molière). From this restricted vantage point, Zupančič explores two themes that preoccupy many theorists we have already discussed: the status of the comic hero and the place of love in comedy. Like the ego, or “I”, in Lacan, the comic protagonist is fundamentally split: not just the humiliated and chastised figure of Aristotle, nor the triumphant one of Torrance, the comic hero, says Zupančič, suffers and enjoys simultaneously. When this translates into an enjoyment of suffering, then this simultaneous and paradoxical feeling is what is known as *jouissance* in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Something in the comic hero is indestructible, but also, Zupančič implies, perverse, for whatever pains they experience (and these are many), “they always rise from the chaos perfectly intact, and relentlessly go on pursuing their goals, chasing their dreams” (2008: 29). And at the same time the comic hero seems to know nothing about it, for he or she is comically unconscious of the back half of the plank on the shoulder, of the hole in the pavement, of the reason for a passionate love. For love, as Lacan said many times, “is a comic feeling” (2015: 109). It is a comic feeling because it “involves a dimension of an unexpected and surprising satisfaction, satisfaction of some other demand than we have already had the opportunity to formulate” (Zupančič 2008: 134). Zupančič is not a reader of Shakespeare, but if she were, she might find in Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599) excellent proof that a lover is precisely “an answer to *none* of our dreams and prayers” (2008: 135), but the bearer of something surprising and un/pleasant that we need to decide what to do with.

FINALLY . . .

It is reported that Ludwig Wittgenstein once planned to write a serious philosophical text composed entirely of jokes (Malcolm 2001: 27–8). He never did, and perhaps no one has yet, although Bernard Suits (1978) has composed a highly playful book about playing. Such a writing would be distinctly impure: neither a writing about comedy, nor a comic writing, but some hybrid of the two. It would be a writing of great lightness, a writing threatening always to take flight, not as sublimity, but from throwing off weight and sobriety. One shorthand for this writing might be Dionysian, and examples of it could be found in the theorists and writers who followed in the path cut by Nietzsche in

his “gay” philosophy. One could look, for example, to the work of Georges Bataille (1985), whose “The Solar Anus” reminds us of a Bakhtinian body of dangerous openings, or to “The Big Toe,” a profane hymn to the baseness of the human foot. Or, one could turn to the most playful and elusive of the texts of Jacques Derrida, the books which infuriate proper philosophers for their refusal to play by the rules, to observe the dialectic, to proceed with seriousness. Or, to “The Laugh of the Medusa” by Hélène Cixous, in which the laughter of the mythical female monster is frightening only for those who fear the breakdown of hierarchies, or who are troubled by the limits of meaning. It is a laughter that, as Andrew Stott says, “is not an expression of pleasure, superiority, or release,” but “a powerful recognition of the end of understanding in language and the comic recognition of the subject’s failure to grasp it” (2005: 141). Perhaps it is the laughter that erupts when we are faced with what Zupančič calls “the unexpected and surprising satisfaction of love.”

Is this writing comical; is it theoretical? Perhaps it is both and neither. As Jacques Lacan says, something in the comic always escapes, and as Stott among other commentators has observed, the comic is in no sense restricted to comedy, cannot be contained in the bounds of a genre. As I have shown in this chapter, in the past century many theorists have attempted to account for comedy in its entirety, or to give complete or comprehensive theories of the form. The completeness of these theories is almost always dependent on the incompleteness of the comic canon they address. At the same time, there are many other theorists who deliberately and explicitly limit their theoretical conclusions to a finite set of comic texts, making no claims for totality in their coverage of comedy. It is often these theorists whose arguments resonate with Lacan’s observation, as they insist that the comic is fleeting and mercurial, bound to frustrate those who would pin it down once and for all. Another set of thinkers, Bakhtin in the lead, cannot be held to account for an open or closed theorizing of comedy, because they never set out in the first place to define the genre: Bakhtin’s quarry was carnival, and theorists of the comic found in his texts fertile ground. Bataille, Cixous, Derrida, and other poststructuralists fall into this category as well. They may not set out to theorize the comic, but the lightness—the *jouissance*—of their writing means that in it something always escapes. They are tricksters, comic heroes, like comedy itself, resisting final definition.

CHAPTER THREE

Praxis

“If You Laugh at Something, Then I’ll Potentially Keep It”: The Praxis of Live Comedy

OLIVER DOUBLE

It’s June 2016, and Jimmy McGhie is previewing his hour-long stand-up comedy show *Apologia*, before taking it to the Edinburgh Fringe. He’s talking to an audience of perhaps twenty people in a drama studio at the University of Kent. Early in the show, he explains the rules of engagement for this public rehearsal:

What I’m gonna do is I’m just gonna throw everything that’s written here at you, really quickly, and, er, if you laugh at something then I’ll potentially keep it. [laughter]

—McGhie 2016

In saying this, he’s making his purpose explicit: putting the material he’s been working on to the acid test by presenting it to an audience to see if it makes us laugh. Routines that get laughs can be kept and perhaps expanded. Those that do not need to be reworked or dropped. This, then, is a performance entirely focused on comic efficacy, and McGhie keeps up a running commentary on it for the almost-an-hour he’s onstage. After a particularly big laugh, he cheerfully declares, “Ooh, now I’m bathed in pride because that worked! [laughter].” When a half-hearted impression of celebrity fitness guru Joe Wicks gets no reaction, he acknowledges:

Erm—but you don’t know who he is, so [laughter]—Again, this is not, this is not the kind of laugh I want, this is laughter [laughter] that can only ever

exist in this room. Outside of this, this laugh doesn't exist, so I'm enjoying it—bec-, but 'cos, but I don't want it. [laughter] I wanted you to laugh at the thing that I've written here. [laughter] Not me deconstructing the thing that I've written here, 'cos that won't get me another fucking star from *The Scotsman*, OK? [laughter]

—Author's transcript of audio recording held in the
British Stand-Up Comedy Archive, BSUCA¹

What's interesting here is that, more than once, McGhie bemoans getting the *wrong kind of laughter*. He has to test his new material out in front of live audiences to find out what's working and what needs more work. However, he's never off duty from being a comedian, and cannot resist commenting on his working processes in order to get “peripheral” laughs, specific to this particular moment and this particular audience. The problem is that the laughter that “can only ever exist in this room” won't help him get the show in shape in time for the Fringe, where it might be performed before the unforgiving eyes of a *Scotsman* reviewer.

This obscure little preview show is useful in starting to identify some of the key features of contemporary comic praxis. Since 1920, comic forms have proliferated, with well-established ones joined by newer varieties. Cultural artefacts competing to get a laugh include short stories, novels, poems, songs,



FIGURE 3.1: Comedian Jimmy McGhie. Photo by Ella Pravetz Photography.

plays, films, sitcoms, LPs, videotapes, CDs, DVDs, downloads, podcasts, and viral videos. However, I will concentrate here on live comedy, where the laughter-making powers of the comic are most rigorously tested.

Live comedy is performed in a public context and seeks to provoke unified laughter from an audience that has gathered for that purpose. If it fails to get regular, unified laughs, this failure is immediately understood by both performer and audience. By contrast, some other forms of comedy are designed to be consumed privately, and it may not matter if they fail to raise any audible laughter whatsoever.

When a reviewer writes that a comic novel led him or her to “laugh out loud,” this is noteworthy because it presumes private, internal amusement as the normal response to books. Saying “I laughed out loud” is akin to saying that a book’s comic powers are unusually strong, making the individual reader lose control and laugh out loud whether they want to or not. Indeed, the novelist Beryl Bainbridge once wrote, “I have often read reviews of books which the critic claims to have laughed out loud at every page, and I have always thought that they were off their heads or lying” (1984: 20). Even if the reader does laugh out loud at every page, the comic novelist has no access to this response, and cannot comment on the audience’s laughter (or lack of it) as McGhie did in his Edinburgh preview.

Comic online videos try to circumvent this problem by *simulating* the unified laughter of live comedy audiences. YouTube logs the number of views, allows viewers to click thumbs-up or thumbs-down to indicate whether or not they enjoyed it, and provides a forum where they can leave written comments containing emojis or the acronym LOL. However, viewers may type “LOL” without actually having laughed out loud, and even if they did, the likelihood is that they did so alone or with friends, rather than as part of a larger audience in a public space. Either way, the YouTubers who create these videos lack the ability to react to the audience’s responses as live comedians can.

Live comedy has come into being as an entity in its own right in the period since 1920, now seen as a separate category rather than merely a part of the broader world of theater (Double 2017: 3–5). The term “live comedy” is sometimes seen as being synonymous with stand-up, but it also encompasses improvisation, sketches, double acts, comic song or poetry, ventriloquism, or other more specialized types of performance. Its origins are varied, and can be found in forms like music hall, vaudeville, variety, burlesque, Borscht Belt resorts, working men’s clubs, and beatnik coffeehouses. Toward the end of the twentieth century, the elements of live comedy specifically geared toward laughter began to move into more specialized venues, with the rise of the comedy club in 1960s America and from 1979 in the UK (Double 2014: 30–2, 44–7).

This chapter examines the processes by which live comedy is made, and how these processes have changed since 1920. Initially, it explores how material is generated, then discusses the difficulties of rehearsing performance which is inherently interactive, finishing by identifying how material develops in performance. I draw on unpublished scripts and recordings in order to be able to examine the creative processes involved in provoking the *right kind* of laughter in detail.

MATERIAL

Creating live comedy begins with material. Material fulfils the same function as the play script in legitimate theater. It's the structure and content of the act, the bit that stays more or less the same from show to show, as opposed to the improvisation unique to this particular night. Since 1920, the process of devising and the form that material takes have changed, as live comedy has evolved and developed.

At the beginning of this period, there was little expectation that comedians should create their own material. The normal practice was to find or buy the songs, gags, and routines they performed on stage. Generally, finding material meant either taking it from a common stock or stealing it from others. In the early 1960s, the American comedy writer Robert Orben wrote, "It is axiomatic in show business that all comedians begin by doing either stock jokes or somebody else's act" (1963: 18).

In American burlesque, comedians relied entirely on stock gags and sketches. The demand to produce new material was intense, as a 1935 article from *Fortune* magazine makes clear: "A burlesque comedian's act is called 'a bit,' and to each show he contributes three to four bits of his own devising. In stock-company burlesque he must, therefore, get that many comic ideas a week, clothe them in dialog and action, rehearse, and put them over" (*Fortune* 1935: 68). In fact, the material was not strictly of the comedian's "own devising," but was adapted from a limited stock of gags and routines that were deemed common property. As the *Fortune* article points out, this made burlesque comedy rather predictable: "Many a historian has commented on the conventionality of the comedy—so formalized that with the first spoken line the last was understood" (1935: 150). Andrew Davis argues that this predictability is an indication of how the material was transmitted within the burlesque industry: "While comments about the 'oldness' of the bits were meant to disparage burlesque comedy, such remarks are an indication that we are looking at a traditional form that is being passed down from one performer to the next through generations" (2011: 18).

In other branches of entertainment, comics paid for the material they used. The cheapest way of acquiring it was to purchase "part rights." This involved

buying jokes published in magazines, booklets, or gag-sheets consisting of several typed pages stapled together. Robert Orben published numerous booklets of gags and routines over several decades, boasting titles like *The Encyclopedia of Patter* (1946) and *One Liners* (1951a). A 1949 price list headed JOHN SLATTERY'S PART RIGHTS MATERIAL (with the prices indicated in shillings, an archaic British coinage) advertises such products as:

"Said Bright & Blue" 7/8 mins. Saucy patter. 21/-

"Sleep Tight" 12/15 mins. Double for "drunk" comic
and Lady partner. Clean, Strong. 21/-

50 Original Gags (10th set) Strictly limited number
available. Some for every type to act. 10/-

—David Drummond Collection²

Slattery claimed his clients included big-name comics like Vic Oliver, Ted Ray, and Charlie Chester, but the point about part rights material was that anybody who bought it was entitled to use it.

More established comedians tended to pay writers to produce material specifically written for them. This would cost significantly more, but brought them exclusive rights to perform this material on stage. Orben advised, "Once a comic becomes a professional, he should not try to write his material without assistance. There is no substitute for good gag-writers and the comedian should put a certain percentage of his salary aside for new routines" (1951b: 10). However, there was no guarantee that this expensive, exclusive material would get laughs, as the great music hall comedian Little Tich pointed out:

Authors and composers get to know one's style . . . and they send 'em along. If one strikes me as being good, I buy the song right out, and then try it, and as a rule it goes dead. Oh! It's a fine sinking fund, buying songs for the public to listen to. You are very lucky if you get one decent song out of six.

—Tich and Findlater 1979: 78

Material bought from writers, whether exclusive or part rights, made sense on the page. For example, an undated script for a UK appearance by the American double act Olsen and Johnson includes the following exchange:

JOHNSON (*Into telephone*) You don't day! [*sic*] (*laughs*) You don't say!
(*laughs*) You don't say! (*laughs*) You don't say! (*laughs*) You don't
say! (*laughs*)

OLSEN Hey, who was it?
JOHNSON She didn't say.

—David Drummond Collection

Here, the point of the joke is very clear, without having to see it performed. Also, because this gag was performed in Britain as part of a revue, we can be fairly certain that the words written on the page corresponded directly to the words spoken on the stage (with the exception of the typo on the first line). Revue scripts were subject to the regulation of the Lord Chamberlain's Office and had to be pre-approved for performance. The Olsen and Johnson script carries the Lord Chamberlain's stamp, showing that it had been through this process. A certificate attached to the front of such scripts effectively forbade any improvisation, stating: "Any proposed alteration or addition to this Play, or alteration of title, must be submitted for the Lord Chamberlain's approval." Furthermore, the Lord Chamberlain's Office could delete individual lines. Another script, for the British variety double act Dave and Joe O'Gorman, contains the following gag, based on spoof news headlines:

DAVE "Baby Chimpanzee born in London Zoo"
JOE "Attlee Blames Churchill". [*handwritten:*] OR TOMMY TRINDER
 BLAMES MAX MILLER. OR LOCAL GAG.

—David Drummond Collection

The gag has been crossed out with a blue pencil and stamped in purple ink: "DELETED BY THE LORD CHAMBERLAIN"—meaning that it was illegal to perform this joke onstage.

In other cases, the relationship between script and performance was looser. For example, a typewritten and annotated script written by Ronald Wolfe for an appearance by Beryl Reid on the ITV show *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* on April 17, 1960, includes the following jokes, transcribed here with all punctuation and strikethroughs as per the original:

Perc is coming back here HOME with me. We're having Chinese food. I'm doing the cooking, Mum's not much help. This morning I said to her . . . Mum, I want to make some Chinese soup. Have you got two shark's fins, and a bird's nest? She said . . . No, do the best you can with a couple of cods-heads, and the cats' basket!

So I went down to the fishmonger. I said to the man . . . have you got a shark? He said . . . "No, I haven't got a shark today . . . how about an angry bloater?"

—Author's collection

In performance, the point of the gags remains the same, but the phrasing is significantly different:

But, er—I'm a bit over-excited really because, see, I'm doing all the cooking tonight, and me mum's no 'elp. Well I said to her this morning, "I'm making some Chinese soup. 'Ave you got two shark's fins and a bird's nest?" And she said, "No, but do the best you can with two cod's 'eads and the cat's basket!" [laughter] *She'll* never be a Madam Butterfly.

But, erm—any road up, after that I went down to the fishmonger and, er—I said, "Erm—'ave you got a shark?" And 'e said, "No, but I've got a very vicious bloater." [laughter]

—*Sunday Night at the London Palladium*

The changes are small but significant. Reid is performing as her regular character Marlene, a teenager from Birmingham, and the original script is more theatrical, playing on the idea that Marlene is waiting for her boyfriend, Perc. In performance this device is dropped, making it much more of a straight stand-up routine. Reid also throws in her catchphrase "any road up", even though it's absent from the script. The final gag is stronger in performance than on paper, the bloater becoming "vicious" rather than merely "angry."

The shift away from material produced by scriptwriters started in the 1950s, with the emergence of comedians like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Jonathan Winters, and Dick Gregory. This new generation significantly changed the nature of live comedy by adopting a much more personal style. Rather than standing onstage and simply telling gags, they talked to the audience as if having an actual conversation, adopting a more relaxed, informal delivery. The material was more personal, the jokes emerging from an unfolding set of anecdotes and observations which described the world from the individual comedian's perspective, often with a biting satirical edge.

This was a revolutionary new approach, and as the comic ethos changed, so did the methodology. Comics like Sahl and Bruce were influenced by jazz, so improvisation became an important part of what they did. Importantly, because the comedy was about self-expression, comedians were expected to generate their own material. Interviewed in 1959, Bruce said, "My concept of a comedian is an individual who creates his own material . . . the comedian is a guy who can create" (Bruce 1984: 15–16). Rather than buying part rights material or paying writers for exclusive routines, Sahl thought up his own material, often with surprising rapidity. Roger Ailes described how he worked: "I once sat with Mort Sahl in Mister Kelly's, and watched him read a paper in a booth. He got up onstage six hours later that night with forty minutes of new material. With no writers, he just did what he had seen in the afternoon papers" (in Nachman 2003: 52).

This revolutionary new approach did not reach the UK in a sustained way until 1979, when the opening of the Comedy Store in Soho led to the birth of alternative comedy. As in America, this opened the door for a more personal approach that involved self-authorship. According to William Cook, “alternative comedians kick-started a stand-up renaissance by writing and performing their own jokes which were particular to their own personalities and experiences” (1994: 15).

The idea of comedy as self-expression, as well as the abolition of the Lord Chamberlain’s powers of censorship in 1968, have significantly changed the form that material takes. When writers provided comedians with material, it had to make sense on the page so that the point of the jokes was clear just from reading them. Now that comedians write material for themselves, the script notes and set lists they produce tend to be less formal and scrappier. Comedians are involved in a constant process of trying to find and develop ideas for their act, and the notebook has become a vital tool in their trade. In it, they hastily jot down ideas for new gags and routines whenever they occur, to avoid the possibility of forgetting them.

For many comedians, the words written on the page are simply a reminder of the idea, which only becomes a gag or routine in performance. This means that written material is now far less transparent, and the point of the joke is rarely clear on the page. For example, a set list for Harry Hill’s 1995 Edinburgh show *Savlon 2000* held in BSUCA includes the following items:

Knees
Aussie Animals
Bean up The Nose
Mouse gladiators
Savlon for harm

Unlike the scripts for Olsen and Johnson, Dave and Joe O’Gorman, and Beryl Reid quoted above, none of these items appear on the page as fully-formed gags. Material like this only makes sense to the comedian who has written it, and only he or she would be able to translate the cryptic comments on the page into routines that work on the stage.

Josie Long provides a good example of the distance between what is written on the page and what is performed onstage. She plans her full-length stand-up shows by making a “big spider diagram” capturing “what I’m passionate about that year, what I feel like I’ve learned, and what I feel like has been most important to me” (Long 2012). Comparing the spider diagram for her show *Romance and Adventure* (BSUCA) to a film of a performance of it at the Battersea Arts Centre in December 2012 (Doug and Josie 2014) illustrates just what a non-linear script it is. As Long performs the show, she follows a

The two words on the page translate to 102 words in performance, and it's only in this highly expanded spoken form that the comic point—about the incongruous contrast between Long's socialist beliefs and her enjoyment of champagne and water skiing—becomes clear.

Such material may eventually become opaque and meaningless even to the comedian who wrote it. I worked as a stand-up myself in the 1980s and 1990s, and looking back at a set list from November 24, 1995, I find that not all of it makes sense to me. Whilst I can remember routines like "Scooby Doo" and "America stuff" reasonably well, I have no memory of items like "French quote" or "George Formby/Ice T" (author's collection). Similarly, when Robin Ince donated some postcards with old set lists written on them to BSUCA, he wrote a note on the envelope he had placed them in: "I think these were for my 2005 Show 'Robin Ince is as dumb as you'—can't remember what most of it meant."

Unlike the fixed scripts of the Lord Chamberlain's era, the script notes and set lists comedians write today are working documents, often amended from performance to performance. The British Stand-Up Comedy Archive has a series of set lists produced by Linda Smith for a series of shows in April and May 2001. These are identical word-processed lists, but each one has a riot of handwritten additions, in which Smith has made notes about how she will change the material for the particular venue she's performing in on this occasion.

Unpublished recordings of these shows provide examples of this kind of venue-specific material, playing on local references. In Thornbury on April 23, Smith aims a comic barb at a nearby town: "Well actually, we were a bit late getting here because there was an accident on the M5. Avonmouth, I believe it's called. [laughter] Well, I'm one to talk really, where I come from that'd be a conservation area. [laughter]" (BSUCA). Handwritten additions to the set lists show how the target of this gag was adapted for Cirencester (with "Avonmouth" replaced by "Swindon"), Hemel Hempstead ("Edmonton"), and Blackwood ("Newport").

Something else this reveals is that even apparently spontaneous jokes can actually be premeditated. For example, Lenny Bruce made performance notes for shows in St. Louis and Chicago in September 1959, containing thirty-two short and sometimes rather cryptic notes for gags and routines. Over a quarter of these notes—nine in total—are for gags relating to the specific circumstances of the show. Some make fun of the venue: "This is a good, solid drinking bar, the type of place where people know when it opens, when it closes—and are there both times." Some address the audience directly, perhaps making fun of a particular section of them: "Why can you people afford to sit at the tables? Because you people have exploited the people who sit at the bars!" He has even prepared responses to any errors in his own performance, like forgetting his

train of thought: “That’s weird; I’ll probably think of it when I get home. Then I’ll call you all up!” (Bruce 1984: 22).

Because they relate to the here-and-now of the immediate circumstance of the show, these gags probably came across in performance as genuinely spontaneous improvisation. In most cases, we have no way of knowing whereabouts in the act they would have been deployed, or whether the wording as it exists on the page represents how it would have been delivered onstage, but some of the gags in Bruce’s notes appear in published recordings of his performances. For example, one note reads: “Audiences: First-show people sit there like it’s New Year’s Eve, with the hat and the horn—‘All right, make me laugh!’” This gag is included in a 1959 performance at the Den in New York: “You know I’m always a little apprehensive at people who come—to nightclubs—on New Year’s Eve at nine o’clock. [quiet laughter] And they sit there with the hat and the horn, waiting. [laughter, 3 seconds]” (Bruce 2004). Although the wording is similar, the performed version has a different comic emphasis. The people “with the hat and the horn” change from being hostile and judgmental (“All right, make me laugh!”), to being rather pathetic—sitting there alone in the nightclub, with a long wait until the New Year celebrations really kick off.

As the relationship between script and performance has become increasingly fluid, it has become ever more difficult to tell the prepared from the genuinely spontaneous. That said, live comedy has incorporated a blend of preparation and spontaneity through much of its history. As the *Fortune* article pointed out, it was certainly part of the burlesque comedian’s art: “Since bits are never committed to paper, his performances will vary nightly—a fact that may confuse both management and censors, for the same bit will have two different conclusions depending on whether the authors are ‘working dirty’ or ‘working clean’” (1935: 68).

Even an improvised comedy troupe like the Noise Next Door rely on “structures”—games or formats into which they can introduce audience suggestions. Just as a stand-up might build a set from a series of gags and routines written on a set list, the Noise’s act is made up of a given sequence of structures, and this basic scaffolding remains constant, even though what they do within these structures involves spontaneous reactions to what the audience gives them. When they perform in comedy clubs (as opposed to touring with a full-length show), their set is particularly fixed. Noise member Sam Pacelli (2017a) acknowledges, “I don’t think we’ve changed our club set drastically since we started . . . It’s the structures themselves that don’t change much. Whereas the content changes every time.”

Although the period since 1920 has seen comedians move from obtaining material to creating it, in recent years some of the biggest names in the UK comedy scene have started using uncredited writers. Stewart Lee was one of the first to break the taboo by discussing this practice in a talk at the University of

Oxford in 2013 (Brown 2013). He has gone on to claim that “using conspicuously uncredited and poorly paid writers to generate profitable stadium-filling laugh content for the TV viewer market is now standard industry practice” (Lee 2015). For Robin Ince, the practice of using writers is at odds with the now strongly established ethos of comedy as self-expression:

One thing that might make the relationship between a stand up and their writers trickier now is that much modern stand up comedy is presumed personal observation/experience or opinion. An audience may not laugh as much if your routine starts with, “you know what annoys my writer when he is using the bus” or “remember my idiosyncratic mother from last tour? Well, you won’t believe what one of my writers imagined her doing the other day.”

—Ince 2014

To be fair, the way comedians work with writers is not simply a question of the lowly comedy scribe delivering a finished script to the big star, but tends to be a more interactive process. A comedy writer who has worked with a big-name TV comic for a few years (and asked not to be named) explains how this relationship works:

So the way [comedian’s name] normally writes is that he’ll have thought of either an initial observation or initial area that he’s got a few thoughts on. And then . . . we’ll sit down and just make a list of every possible aspect . . . of that topic . . . [A]t this stage, it wouldn’t be jokes. It would just be, “Oh, there’s this aspect of it, or there’s that aspect of it. Or this is something funny that might be worth exploring.” And that’d be the two of us, together. In fact, for his telly stuff I might go away and write stuff on my own, but for live, for his stand-up, I don’t think there’s ever a point, in fact there’s very rarely a point when I’m actually putting pen to paper.

—Anonymous comedy writer 2017

The writer, then, works collaboratively with the comedian as a kind of creative partner—even if the lack of a writing credit seems somewhat at odds with a spirit of collaboration.

What this reveals is the fact that even when comedians don’t perform their own material, they can still retain a sense of creative agency over their work. The comedians of the past who paid writers to produce material for them—and credited them for it—had clear ideas of what they wanted. By instructing the writers on what was required, they had some input into the creation of the final product. A 1933 article in *The Observer* newspaper describes how carefully Gracie Fields worked with songwriters, whilst meeting with them in her dressing room at the London Palladium:

Another song-writer comes into the room—an older hand, one who has already written Miss Fields some of her successes. He has a recent composition not only in his pocket but on his lips, for he insists on whispering its melody hoarsely to her in person. She approves of the melody, but insists with perfect friendliness that the time must be altered and the words re-written.

REHEARSAL

In any case, material is only one ingredient in the alchemy of live comedy—merely a starting point. The process of turning the words on the page into living, breathing performance which gets regular laughter from a paying audience is ultimately the responsibility of the comedian. Even those comics who were the passive recipients of verbatim scripts, made unchangeable by the Lord Chamberlain's decree, still had the gargantuan task of getting those scripts on their feet and making them work.

The art of the great sketch comedian Sid Field, who became a huge star in the 1940s, was to take unpromising material and turn it into comedy gold. Jerry Desmonde, who worked as Field's stooge from 1942, recalled:

From the scripts you got nothing. Nothing at all . . . Sidney, at any rate, never relied on the script for laughs. In the Golf Sketch, the lines told you nothing and, on reading them straight, they seemed like ordinary dialog—they could have been the dialog perhaps of a one-act play and I wasn't very happy about the prospects of success.

—in Fisher 1975: 74–5

The process of turning the 'ordinary dialog' into effective comic performance wasn't achieved in the rehearsal room. According to Field's biographer John Fisher, "He could clown among his friends, but he felt self-conscious when it came to rehearsing business on his own. Pulling faces at himself in the mirror seemed silly to him" (1975: 49). Jerry Desmonde suggested that even when Field was not rehearsing alone, he couldn't produce the magic he created onstage: "My impressions weren't changed much when we talked the sketch through, for Sid was never at his best in the rehearsal room" (in Fisher 1975: 74). It was only once in front of a live audience that Field could bring his comedy to life.

Rehearsing comedy is inherently difficult, and live comedians are often averse to rehearsals. In his ghost-written autobiography, Little Tich confessed: "I'm a failure at rehearsals; I can't get any vim into it . . . In fact, I just mumble something, wave my hand to indicate that I'm going down-stage, jerk my thumb over my shoulder to signify that I'm going back again, mumble something else, and nod to imply that I'm 'off'!" (2007: 48–9). Similarly, Charles Rieser recalled Abbott & Costello's approach to rehearsing whilst making films: "They

were known as the greatest non-rehearsers of all time; they hated to rehearse. They were both such quick studies that . . . in spite of the limited time that they would want to give to rehearsals, they'd have all the moves and all the lines down" (in Davis 2011: 11–12). As Andrew Davis points out, they acquired this attitude to rehearsal in burlesque, where "Rehearsals were often perfunctory affairs" (2011: 12). Many present-day comics have also spoken of the difficulties of rehearsal. Jimmy McGhie, for example, admits: "I feel like an absolute boiled egg standing in front of a mirror going, 'So, er!' All I can think of is Robert de Niro in *King of Comedy*" (McGhie and Houghton 2017).

The main problem with rehearsing comedy is that the lack of audience means there is no echo of laughter to inspire the performer. Although many comedians now avoid rehearsing altogether, Andy de la Tour remembers rigorously rehearsing his act when he performed on the alternative cabaret circuit of the early 1980s:

As I would do it, it would distil down—you know, the two pages of prose about, say, Northern Ireland, would distil down to . . . a minute and a half, or something like that. So then I would get that in my mind. And then I would sometimes go back to the written stuff and cross out, so there is a sort of written record . . . so that I've got something to remember by . . . I would have to say the stuff out loud, I'd have to hear it out loud to see the rhythm of something.

—de la Tour 2016

In this account, there are three advantages to rehearsing. First, it allows the material to be tightened up and shrunk down, to take shape in spoken form. Second, it gets the material into the comedian's mind, so that it can be remembered in performance. Third, speaking the words aloud allows the comedian to explore the rhythm of the lines, and to make the act of speaking the words familiar.

This chimes with what other comedians say about rehearsing. The process is often rough and perfunctory, happening in the comedian's own home rather than a rehearsal studio, perhaps worked into some other activity. Tom Houghton describes how he works:

Do you know what I've found is a trick that I do? Write an idea in bullet points, and then I'll go for a run and just talk to myself, on the run . . . Your brain functions differently when you're doing exercise . . . And I look mental, because I'm running around London, going, "And then the dog was chasing me!" . . . When I'm cooking breakfast or hopping round my kitchen . . . I occasionally try and say things out loud.

—McGhie and Houghton 2017

Contradictory as it may sound, even comedy improvisers rehearse before facing an audience. Sam Pacelli explains that the Noise Next Door would rehearse twice a week when they first started, and although they do it less frequently now, they still feel the need to rehearse new structures that they want to introduce into the act: “It’s super important to ensure that each game structure works for any possible suggestion. So when we rehearse, we bombard the game with every conceivable type of suggestion. The results then form the base of what question we ask the audience which will then lead the game down the right sort of path” (Pacelli 2017b).

One interesting aspect of the way comedians rehearse is the common idea that they do it into a mirror, as in the quotes cited above relating to Sid Field and Jimmy McGhie. Robert Orben offered contradictory advice on mirrors. In 1951, he boldly declared, “You can’t practice comedy or develop comedy technique before a mirror” (1951b: 45). By 1963, he had changed his mind: “You [rehearse] by standing in front of a full-length mirror and delivering the material into a stand mike as if you were in front of an audience . . . Your facial expressions are crucial to the success of the routine. You can point up punchlines by mugging and little bits of physical movement” (1963: 11–12). Similarly, in his book *How to Become a Comedian*, the actor and comedian Lupino Lane recommends, “It is good to practise expressions in front of the looking-glass. This will give you facial control” (1945: 15).

Ted Ray gave an evocative account of rehearsing in front of a mirror for his metropolitan debut at the London Music Hall in Shoreditch in 1930:

Every night, hour after hour, I would stand in front of the mirror in my bedroom, grimacing, smiling and winking with the idea of getting the most effective expression for putting over a joke. This may sound rather ridiculous and I have no doubt that had anybody happened to see me they would have thought I had gone off my head, but if nothing else this story shows that I was taking my work with desperate seriousness.

—Ray 1952: 69

Ray may have believed that rehearsing into a mirror improved his facial expressions, but the great Italian playwright, actor, and comedian Dario Fo specifically advised against using them to rehearse mask work: “Never place yourself in front of a mirror, because the results are likely to be unfortunate. To gain a reflection of your own gestures, it is better to use your imagination, and to bear in mind that the best mirror of all is an audience” (1991: 37).

What Fo says starts to suggest the two key problems with using a mirror. First, although it allows us to see our facial expressions, gestures, and so on, we will not have this visual information at our disposal in performance. It’s better to simply “use your imagination” as to what you might look like to an audience,

because this is how you will experience it when you perform. Second, the mirror is no substitute for an audience, because it cannot provide the laughter and applause they will give. An audience is the “best mirror of all,” because their responses tell the performer whether what he or she is doing is working, and this is far more important than providing a visual image of the self.

PERFORMANCE

Although generating material is important for most comedians, and rehearsing can be equally important, the processes that happen in advance are never as crucial as the moment of performance itself. It is in the moment when comedians face an audience that live comedy truly comes into being, because it is the laughter of the audience that gives it meaning and importance. The importance of the audience has been widely recognized by comedians. As Jimmy McGhie puts it: “There’s no other medium of performance, I think, that is so reliant on the crowd . . . If there’s no-one in front of a stand-up, it’s just a person talking. There’s nothing to it at all” (McGhie and Houghton 2017).

Because laughter is, by definition, central to any form of live comic performance, comedians develop a heightened awareness of audience response, which guides them onwards. Gracie Fields said, “With an audience in front of me I always know what I’m doing” (in *The Observer* 1933). Little Tich gave a vivid account of the importance of audience in how he worked: “It is before the audience that I seek my effects. I add to them, eliminate, modify according to reactions in the theater. I work like a sculptor who models his statue from what he sees in front of him. The laughter of the audience serves as my model” (Tich and Findlater 1979: 58). Like Fo’s analogy of audience-as-mirror, Tich described the audience helping to show him what to do to create his best work.

Because audiences help comedians to see what is needed, new material rarely emerges fully formed in performance, but instead develops from show to show. Each new experience in front of an audience allows the comedian to make new discoveries. A *Guardian* article about the genesis of Bridget Christie’s highly acclaimed anti-Brexit show *Because You Demanded It* notes just how much it changed over the course of her Edinburgh run: “Over the month, the show has changed by about 25%, she reckons, as she workshopped ideas, honed her thoughts and kept up with the news” (Williams 2017).

In 2012, Jason Zinoman wrote a *New York Times* article about how the stand-up comic Myq Kaplan developed a new routine from scratch. This starts with a single joke about the absurdity of old-fashioned chivalry, but Zinoman charts in detail how in different shows in different venues, Kaplan explored the premise from different angles, added new ideas and constantly honed them to try and find their most effective form.

In its first performance at the Broadway Comedy Club in Manhattan on December 26, 2011, the initial idea was phrased like this: “If there was a puddle, and a lady was like, ‘I don’t want to walk across a puddle,’ well, let me put my jacket down, because the bottom of your shoe is more important than my whole jacket.” However, as Zinoman explains, “With jokes every word matters. So Mr. Kaplan’s first breakthrough was three days later onstage at the Comedy Studio in Boston, where on the spot he changed “bottom of your shoe” to “lady feet-bottoms.” It is this phrasing that appears in the version of the routine performed at Acme Comedy Co., Minneapolis, in September 2012, recorded for Kaplan’s CD, *Meat Robot* (2013): “A gentleman—is meant to throw his jacket on a puddle for a lady because we all know lady feet-bottoms more important [*sic*] than the whole torso of a man. [laughter]”

Some comedians make notes on their performances to keep track of how material is developing and evolving, and these can be surprisingly rigorous. A 1960 *Guardian* article describes the record-keeping of Ken Dodd, who started his comedy career in variety:

He (or his fiancée, Miss Anita Boutin) has recorded the audience’s response to every joke, every entrance, and every exit in every town he has appeared at during those years of touring or pantomime. Thumbing through the dog-eared notebooks, which now number about forty, you can with patience pin down an old Dodd joke like a butterfly, and trace its birth, life, and eventual death with an occasional resurrection.

The fluidity of material in performance—and the fact that comedians learn from audience reactions in each successive show—mean that live comedy contains an element of rehearsing in public. This rehearsal element has become formalized in recent years with the emergence of special shows explicitly designed to help comedians develop new material. New material nights and preview shows are marketed in such a way as to let the audience know that this is work in development, and adjust their expectations accordingly.

For example, Old Rope Comedy Club, which runs on Monday nights at the Phoenix in central London, is designed as a platform to allow comedians to try out new material. Because the night is precisely about the creation of comedy, there’s a workshop element, with comedians discussing their new jokes and offering each other advice. In new material nights, comedians pay special attention to how the jokes are going down, and—like Ken Dodd—make notes on these responses. As Angela Barnes puts it, “It’s like you mark yourself, as you go through, you know. At a new material night when you can take notes onstage, and you have your own little codes” (*A History of Comedy in Several Objects* 2017). They may also draw attention to the fact that they are trying things out, and establish the rules of engagement in a jokey way. Sarah Millican (2012)

says, “I tick them as I go along and I always joke with the audience that night, tick if they laugh, cross if they don’t laugh. And if they don’t laugh but I think it’s gold, I put ‘FT’ which stands for ‘Fuck Them’. And that’s the first joke, you get your first laugh before you’ve done anything.”

Preview shows—like the one discussed at the beginning of this chapter—are slightly different. Here, as well as testing out gags and routines, the comedian explores the overall shape of a full-length show. Jimmy McGhie explains:

It helps you develop the show as a whole. I think that’s the point. You can develop material, you can work on individual bits, you know, but it’s an opportunity to do the whole thing. To be aware of . . . the thrust of the narrative and everything. I could isolate a bit from the show and go and do it at a gig tomorrow and tune it up and get it kind of tight, but you know the preview is when you go, “Is this an interesting hour? Is this going to hold together as an hour? Or is this, like, twenty minutes of it is good and the rest is just waffle.”

—McGhie and Houghton 2017

New material nights and preview shows are a testament to the fluid responsiveness of live comedy. This is rooted in the direct communication between stage and auditorium, and the active role that audience plays in validating the performance with their laughter. Of course, live comedy is at its most fluidly responsive when performers say or do something genuinely unplanned. Some acts place this kind of improvisation at the heart of what they do, playing on their ability to come up with material in front of the audience’s very eyes.

Although Keith Johnstone, the great pioneer of improvised theater, is cynical about using suggestions from the audience (1981: 88; 1999: 25–7), it is common practice for comic improvisers to do just that, in order to demonstrate that they are actually improvising. Sam Pacelli (2017a) of the Noise Next Door believes that, “The audience have to know, subconsciously or otherwise, that there is an element of this which isn’t in our control.” The Noise use audience suggestions in many of their routine. For example, in “Boy Band,” they invite a female punter onto the stage, ask her a few set questions, and then sing her a cod romantic ballad with lyrics based around her answers.

Another technique they use to highlight their improvisation is something they call “shanking.” Pacelli (2017a) explains how this works: “Well that’s where one of us will intentionally put somebody else in the shit. To intentionally muck them up. And audience members do it as well . . . It’s just funny to watch you struggle.” For example, in a performance in May 2017, the Noise are improvising a sketch in which one of them, Charlie Granville, is stuck to a rocket. Tom Livingstone, who is managing audience suggestions, asks the

audience what sticky substance has been used to stick Charlie to the rocket. Somebody shouts, “Gripfill!” This turns out to be an obscure DIY product, clearly a reference designed to flummox the performers. Indeed, Tom is duly flummoxed. Shortly afterwards, Sam enters as Henry VIII and says to Tom: “I’m from the 1500s, so I don’t know what Gripfill is. Please tell me about it in vivid detail” (The Noise Next Door 2017). This gets a big laugh.

By setting up something which both performers and audience know will be extremely difficult to do, shanking brings the precariousness of improvisation to the fore. It’s funny to see the performer struggle to try and fulfill a calculatedly unfair suggestion, and there is a sense of shared triumph if he or she finds a way to resolve the dilemma. Clearly, improvised comedy requires specific skills, and shanking is not the only technique at play in the sketch. Later, Sam-as-Henry-VIII puts his hand on his hip and claims he is holding one of his wives’ heads under his arm. When somebody asks which wife, he comes straight back with, “It could be the second or the fifth.” To come up with such a line, he is doing something the Noise call “Rolodexing.” Pacelli (2017a) explains what this entails: “If a suggestion comes up, you Rolodex in your mind as quickly as possible the first five things you can think of to do with that suggestion that then your jokes will be based off of.”



FIGURE 3.3: The Noise Next Door. Photo by Steve Ullathorne.

The idea, then, is that the performers will each have their own mental “Rolodex” covering as many subjects as possible. When a subject is suggested, it triggers off a set of associations that can be used as the references from which fresh jokes can be made. In this case, after being cast by an audience member as Henry VIII, Pacelli has mentally flicked through a set of associations with that particular king, and come up with “wife beheading.” As he explains, the Noise developed a base of knowledge for Rolodexing in a surprisingly systematic way: “A year or so in, we bought as many of the GCSE revision guide books as we could, in as many different subjects, and just read them all in the car on the way to gigs . . . mainly it was to put just trigger words into our minds that would be helpful for as many different suggestions as possible” (Pacelli 2017a).

Clearly, comedy improvisation can require an extraordinary level of skill. Nina Conti’s show *In Your Face* begins with the ventriloquist going along the front row talking to the audience with her incongruously rude puppet, Monkey. At this stage, she’s not only getting laughs by improvising responses to what the front row punters say, but also choosing who she will bring up onto the stage with her for the next part of the show. Here, she puts ventriloquism masks onto the people she has brought up. These cover the bottom half of their faces, with moving mouths that she can control, allowing her to make them speak using her own ventriloquized voice. She gradually brings more and more of them onto the stage, interacting with them and allowing them to interact with each other.

Although there’s a basic structure to the show, it plays out differently every time, because she builds the unique characters she imposes on her volunteers from cues they give her. She explains that the way she does this has changed over time:

I think when I started doing it I used to go for the opposite of what they were displaying. So I would’ve had him saying, if he was physically uncomfortable, “I’m thrilled to be here and I can’t wait to dance.” But I’ve actually found there’s more mileage if you just sit into who they are and where they are . . . I had two young teenagers, they were fourteen and sixteen, on the other night, and they didn’t move at all . . . so the whole thing was about who could keep the stillest.

—Conti 2015a

In order to make this show work—to get regular laughs by conjuring up funny material in the moment—Conti has to deploy a number of highly specialized skills at the same time. The basic set-up at the beginning requires the technical skill of being able to provide Monkey’s voice without moving her lips, but also the considerable acting skill of playing two characters at once. Part of the immense charm of the act is the contrast between Monkey (gruffly outspoken

and prurient) and Nina (apologetic and giggling with embarrassment at the awful things he says).

While doing this, she is casting the show from the audience, and as they join her onstage, she is having to invent characters for them, operate their masks, provide voices for them, and—throughout all of this—regularly get laughs from the things she makes them say and do. She cheerfully admits that sometimes the challenge gets the better of her: “It’s very high risk. I’d say . . . probably one in ten goes badly awry” (Conti 2015a). However, by this she does not mean that one in ten shows fail as comedy—that they gets no laughs—but rather that they feel out of her control.

Toward the end of the show, Conti does a routine with just her and Monkey, in which he hypnotizes her and once she is asleep, Monkey—being now a puppet without an operator—becomes totally inert. The gag plays on the basic fiction of ventriloquism and the audience laugh, but then the silence continues, as both Nina and Monkey remain dormant. There is another laugh, as we realize how audaciously Conti is pushing the idea of being hypnotized—and then another as the silence continues, and so on, in waves. The comic moment only finishes when somebody from the audience shouts out to wake Nina and break the cycle (Conti 2015b). Conti explains how this gag—built from silence, expectation, and audacity—was discovered:

Well it happened by accident one night, because I did this bit where he would hypnotize me and then he’d sing a song. But then I found out one night that I didn’t make him say anything for a minute. And everybody thought, “Oh my God! He’s hypnotized—you know, he can’t move!” And they laughed and so the audience gave me that gag. And so I kept it . . . In this show I’ve just pushed it. You know, I mean I think I went three minutes one night.

—Conti 2015a

By saying that the audience gave her this gag, Conti highlights the central role the members of the audience play in the creation of live comedy. In a sense, they are the comedian’s collaborators, helping him or her to develop the material by demonstrating with their laughter what they find funny.

The idea of audience-as-collaborator has long been recognized. A review of Sid Field’s show *Strike It Again* claimed that the secret of his success was “a happy co-operation with the members of the audience” (*The Stage* 1944). According to Jerry Desmonde, Field “relied on the audience to tell him as he went along, where the laughs were going to break. The audience, in fact, writes most of the sketches you see on the Variety Stage” (in Fisher 1975: 75). Similarly, Jimmy McGhie acknowledges, “You can’t possibly develop a piece of material without the audience. It’s absolutely fundamentally impossible” (McGhie and

Houghton 2017). In a gig at Downstairs at the King's Head on April 18, 2001—a warm-up for a short tour—Linda Smith jokes about how much the audience are helping her: “It’s almost like, this show, it’s almost like a bit of group therapy, kind of in reverse. Where sort of lots of you help one of me, is how it goes” (BSUCA). Stuart Goldsmith has taken the idea of audience-as-collaborator further. On tour, he performs his actual show in the first half, and invites the audience back to watch him develop new material in the second half. Here, he makes no secret of the fact that he is using them to workshop his new gags. He says that when he first tried this, “I couldn’t believe how well it worked. You’re playing to an audience who’ve already bought into you, and who’ve had a drink and relaxed during the break, and who’ve decided to come back, *knowing that you’re planning to play around with new material.*” He might, for example, stop after a muted response to a punchline to ask what is wrong with the joke in its current form, or perhaps ask the audience to suggest a better reference. He gives a specific example of this: “I do remember discovering that ‘guys and dolls’ isn’t as well-known an example of a musical as I’d thought, so an audience let me know that simply substituting ‘Annie’ would make the joke work” (Goldsmith 2017).

WORKING HARD

The period since 1920 has seen advances in technology that have transformed the entertainment industry—from radio to the online video. At the same time, live comedy remains—as Philip Auslander described it—“a fundamentally old-fashioned, labor-intensive, low-tech performance mode” (1992: 199). However, while it is essentially true that the majority of live comedy is low-tech, this does not mean that comedians have avoided using new technology in their work. Perhaps the best example is that for more than half a century, they have been recording their performances. In the early 1960s, Robert Orben advised:

The tape recorder is one of the most valuable devices a comic can possess. I would suggest that once a month you record your entire range of working material, or as much of it as possible . . . These tapes should be made before live audiences. Listen to the playback to see where your performance has let down or where the material has let you down.

—1963: 45

Lenny Bruce was using a reel-to-reel tape recorder to record and analyze his act as early as 1957 (Goldman 1991: 214). In the 1970s, Steve Martin bought himself a cassette recorder for the same reason (Martin 2007: 137–9). In 2016, Christopher Molineux published the result of a survey of comedians’ working methods, in which he discovered that “77% of the subjects made audio or

video recordings of their shows, which were later reviewed and any new material deemed to be valuable was then transcribed or committed to memory” (2016: 3–4).

More recently, comedians have used social media as part of the process of developing material. It’s relatively common for comedians to tweet jokes, which might go into their act if they get a sufficiently good reaction on Twitter. Angela Barnes uses social media not to test the strength of potential gags, but to check that the foundations on which they are built are sound:

I mainly use Facebook to check references for jokes. Because I am 40 now (ouch)—I have become aware that some references that might seem obvious to me, might completely go over the head of a 25 year old. On FB, I have friends of all ages, so it’s a good place to check. For example, I had a routine about Duncan Goodhew, and it quickly became clear that I had to write something about who he was because anyone under 30 didn’t have a clue!

—Barnes 2017

Increasingly, live comedians also have started to use new technology onstage. Sam Pacelli explains how the Noise Next Door have used it to find new ways of improvising:

Especially in the last few years, tech has really changed how we create structures as well, because now we can use the internet to create games. Or even just apps on iPads. Like you get soundboards which are pre-loaded with hundreds of different sound effects. So you can just get an audience member to press them at any point during a scene, and you’ve got a brand new structure which an audience member can play with you. And gets a lot of laughs because you have no idea what they’re doing.

—Pacelli 2017a

What is important in all of these examples is that technology is not replacing existing aspects of live comedy, but simply enhancing them. Taping the show is just a slightly more advanced form of the kind of written records kept by Ken Dodd. By using Facebook to check her references, Angela Barnes is essentially doing the same thing as Stuart Goldsmith does when he workshops material with the audience in the second half of his touring shows. By using websites and iPads, the Noise Next Door are just finding new ways to demonstrate to their audience that they really are improvising their responses in the moment.

All of these techniques, then, are examples of how diligently comedians approach the task of making us laugh. In the early 1950s, Orben argued that, “The general public considers a comedian a cross between a low-grade moron and a high-grade idiot. They seem to forget that the nonsense he performs is a

carefully worked out art” (1951a: 5). Over six decades later, Jason Zinoman (2012) was making the same point: “The most underestimated quality of successful stand-up comedians is how hard-working they are.” The paradox of live comedy is that while it may look effortless and spontaneous, that spontaneity has been won through hard work. Developing the act is an ongoing cycle, with the comedian constantly learning from audience responses, shifting and changing fluidly from performance to performance, and improvising in the moment in the constant search for more frequent and bigger laughs. As Bridget Christie puts it, “Everything is always a work in progress . . . There is no end point” (in Williams 2017).

In an age of rapid technological advance, live comedy remains popular because it allows performer and audience to encounter each other in a shared physical space, communicate directly, and come to an agreement over what is funny. This is true even—or perhaps especially—when, as with Jimmy McGhie, the laughter is the kind “that can only ever exist in this room.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Identity

Laughs Last—Gender, Power, and Comic Identity

JOANNE GILBERT

The tweet heard around the world—that is, Roseanne Barr’s unfortunate “joke”—was the one that cost her the reboot of her sitcom, *Roseanne*, and potentially her comedic career.¹ Was her remark about Valerie Jarrett, former Senior Adviser to President Obama, racist? Indisputably. Was it a joke? Perhaps. Does it matter? Definitely. Roseanne is a celebrity, a comic, and a known entity. Her acerbic, raucous, “take no prisoners” rhetorical style is precisely what accounted for her popularity as a stand-up comic and, ultimately, a sitcom icon. Her comic identity has been widely read as feminist; her material has always been aggressive. So why was this particular remark her rhetorical undoing?

Questions of how and whether we should separate artists from their art have perhaps never been more critical than in the cultural context of the “Black Lives Matter” and “Me Too” movements, as artists and audiences wrestle with the inextricable nature of the art–artist relationship. In the 1950s, New Critics warned us not to commit the dread intentional fallacy, yet over sixty years later, we are faced with precisely that. How can we know an artist’s intent? Is knowing this important? And what if the artist is a racist? A misogynist? A homophobe? How and to what extent should these data frame audience expectation and response?

Our deeply polarized political landscape coupled with the breakneck pace of digital media platforms creates the perfect storm as ideologically charged issues and identity politics are daily adjudicated in the court of public opinion. In the realm of art and entertainment, audiences make choices about which art to

support based on the artists' personal histories. Where should audiences draw the line—harassment, assault, murder? Can art be appreciated for its own sake, devoid of the rhetorical entailments of the artist's biography? How does the introduction of a comic frame complicate the issue? Roseanne claimed that she had made a "joke," albeit an unsuccessful one.² On one level, she merely did what comics have done historically—she used humor to invert a power dynamic, putting down a former government official. Her use of a racial canard, however, comparing Jarrett to an ape, was not read as humor. Rather, Roseanne's tweet was broadly construed as a toxic and malicious racial epithet that would not be tolerated in public discourse. And despite her public apology, the damage had been done as reaction to her comment triggered outrage and swift consequences.

Clearly, Roseanne's precipitous downfall is a cautionary tale for comics; jokes are taken seriously in the public sphere where identity trumps comedy, and humor targeting marginalized groups—once the gold standard of stand-up comedy—is no longer acceptable.³ More than any other rhetorical form, humor requires an audience to succeed, requires laughter to be legitimized as humor.⁴ Whether Roseanne truly intended her comment to be a joke is debatable, but immaterial. The reception of her tweet as a racist slur is ultimately all that mattered as her rebooted show, and even syndicated episodes of her now classic original show, were hastily removed from media outlets. Was this action appropriate? Should comedy-as-art be separated from a comic's identity? Is this even possible? In the current historical moment, when careers are toppled instantaneously through corporate firings and public boycotts, these questions have taken on a profound and chilling relevance. Certainly, scholars of humor must engage in robust and sustained debate about these essential issues.

Two key questions are central to any discussion of the often-fraught relationship between comedy and identity: (1) to what extent do audiences conflate the private and public persona of popular comics?, and (2) how can humor that appears racist, sexist, and homophobic serve as subversive cultural critique? These questions are integrally related, as audience perception clearly determines the extent to which comedy either reinforces or challenges cultural norms. Although short of collecting survey data, we cannot know what specifically causes particular audience members to laugh, indicators of audience perception might include the presence of laughter during live comic performance, as well as YouTube comments following comic videos. This chapter explores the above questions through an examination of the stand-up comedy of Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes, and consideration of the popular TV sitcoms *The Big Bang Theory* and *Modern Family*. Investigation of these cultural texts affords insight not only into the complex and contested relationship between comedy and identity, but also into the relationship between humor and power in a broader sociocultural context. Specifically, exploring the rhetorical construction of gender identity in both stand-up and sitcoms reveals the extent to which

comics and comedy writers may appear to endorse hegemonic values, even while offering implicit critique of these values.

FUNCTIONS AND THEORIES OF HUMOR

Humor is a unique discursive form. Functioning as “anti-rhetoric,” jokes simultaneously appear to advance agendas, and disavow their own potential impact through built-in disclaimers.⁵ Indeed, a comic frame enables joke-tellers to engage in even controversial cultural critique with a perpetual wry wink, an implicit “just kidding” in every barb or punchline. By telling jokes, comics can address social and political issues without actually endorsing a particular viewpoint. Although they may appear to be advocating a specific perspective, comics are inevitably aware that, “These are the jokes, Folks!” In other words, comedic discourse is not intended to be taken seriously, enabling comics to “get away” with articulating ideas not generally accepted in polite conversation.

As Kenneth Burke (1950) taught us years ago, identification is a critical element of effective rhetoric; humor used well creates identification in audiences, often casting in-group/out-group distinctions in sharp relief.⁶ When audience members identify with a particular bit, they are more likely to find it funny and consequently, to laugh. And when entire groups (such as women or Jews) identify, humor can create cohesion among even relative strangers. This galvanizing function of humor—its ability to elicit laughter and pleasure through identification and create group cohesion—is among its most important properties.

Ultimately, by subverting power dynamics, humor serves as cultural critique ranging from benign to incendiary. As the contemporary analogues of ancient fools and medieval court jesters, stand-up comics are practitioners of an age-old art: they speak truth to power in a comic frame, inverting relationships, and becoming “fool-makers.”⁷ In their carnivalesque world, rendered topsy-turvy through the apt use of “put-down” humor, comics reign supreme, lampooning and lambasting the powerful, and laughing all the way to the bank. Historically, as Zidjerveld (1982) explains, the comic-as-cultural-critic has usually been associated with conditions of marginality. In fact, it is the historical relationship between comedy and marginality that explains the rich and enduring traditions of humor among marginalized groups such as Jews, African Americans, the LGBTQ community, and women. When members of these groups level caustic critique at the hegemonic group (e.g., straight, white, Christian, able-bodied males), their humor “works” by calling attention to cultural and economic inequities.

Why and how does humor work in general? As Graham et al. (1992) note, three schools of thought provide insight. The first, Incongruity Theory, originating with Immanuel Kant, hinges upon the element of surprise, helping us understand what drives word-play like punning, as well as most punchlines.

Second, Freudian or Relief/Arousal Theory suggests that laughter functions as catharsis for suppressed libidinal drives and desires; this explains the comic potential of such topics as sex and death, as the taboo nature of certain issues makes them frequent grist for the comedy mill. Finally, Superiority Theory, associated with Henri Bergson, demands “a momentary anesthesia of the heart” (Bergson [1900] 1956), as laughter results from perceived power differentials—contexts in which one person or group is “up” and the other “down.” For the purposes of this discussion, Superiority Theory is most salient, as it helps us understand the interdependent relationship between humor and power.

COMIC PERSONAE AND AUDIENCE PERCEPTION

The word “persona” comes from the Latin, meaning “mask,” a term that aptly describes the character assumed by most stand-up comics, in some cases, an amplified version of their real personalities. Stand-up comedy was not always character-driven, however; in the first half of the twentieth century, generic jokes prevailed. A catalyst in the evolution of stand-up comedy, Lenny Bruce is often credited as a “driving force behind the shift from schpritz to reality” (Borns 1987: 238) as he ushered in the tradition of autobiographical comedy. Prior to Bruce taking the stage in the 1950s, audiences went to see a comic’s *act*; after Bruce, however, audiences went to see a *comic*. Quite simply, nobody but Lenny Bruce could perform Lenny Bruce’s act. This tradition continues today as marginal comic personae provide unique and indelible performances, unable to be replicated by others.

In my book, *Performing Marginality* (Gilbert 2004), I focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century female comedic traditions, offering a taxonomy of rhetorical postures historically adopted by female comics: the kid, bawd, bitch, whiner, and reporter. Two of these postures, the bawd and the bitch, provide a critical frame within which to examine contemporary comedic identities both onstage and in sitcoms.⁸ Although both postures feature female power, each has its own unique articulation. The bawd is seductive, deftly employing her sexuality to titillate her audience, often describing encounters in explicit detail. Working within a tradition established by performers such as the Canadian, Eva Tanguay, and Vaudevillians, Lillian Shaw and Kate Elinore, including such well-known celebrities as Sophie Tucker, Mae West, and Jackie “Mom’s” Mabley, along with the “blue” comedy album stars of the 1960s, Bea Bea Benson, Rusty Warren, and Belle Barth, and developing in the acts of stars like Bette Midler, Caroline Rhea, and Thea Vidale, contemporary bawd comics draw upon a rich history of “blatantly and unabashedly sexual/sensual . . . verbal and nonverbal communication” (Gilbert 2018: 206). Wielding rhetorical power over their audiences by foregrounding their femaleness, bawd comics use their often-ample physical presence in service of their seemingly insatiable desire.

Bitch comics, on the other hand, are not interested in seducing their audiences. Rather, this aggressive and confrontational posture taunts, insults, and sometimes offends, attacking both individuals (including the occasional hapless audience member) and institutions. Operating within a robust rhetorical heritage that includes such prototypical “bitches” as Joan Rivers, Joy Behar, Lea Delaria, and of course, Roseanne, contemporary bitch comics are those—perhaps unsurprisingly—labeled by critics as “feminist.” As the angriest of the five female comedic postures, the bitch can be intimidating to audiences; she does, however, exult in her rage. In fact, “the culturally entrenched stereotype of the angry feminist is one that bitch comics simultaneously condemn and embrace as they offer acerbic social critique through their biting humor” (Gilbert 2018: 207).

Using both the bawd and bitch postures as a way to reclaim agency through frank and explicit discussion of their emotional and physical desires, for more than a century female comics have consistently articulated a counter-hegemonic discourse, subverting the status quo through the incisive cultural critique undergirding their material. And although most contemporary comics assume autobiographically fueled personae, their onstage and offstage selves remain distinct. It is precisely the inability or unwillingness of some audiences to understand this distinction, however, that complicates the relationship between comedy and identity. Two notable examples of contemporary female comics daily contributing to the comedy/identity conversation are Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes.

AMY SCHUMER AS A NEW BAWD

Arguably the most successful female comic working today, Amy Schumer “performs a type of innocent ignorance that, combined with her conventionally attractive appearance, renders her bawdy humor incongruous” (Gilbert 2018: 212). With Emmy and Peabody awards to her credit, along with a \$9 million book deal, successful film, and widely acclaimed TV show, Amy Schumer performs a comedic persona based on “cultivated cluelessness” (Gilbert 2018: 212), frequently cocking her head to the side in a classic “Valley Girl” posture, even as she performs sometimes controversial, sexually explicit material such as the line, “I used to sleep with mostly Hispanic guys, but now I just *prefer* consensual” (Schumer 2014). Unlike her comedic predecessor, Sarah Silverman, who has received considerable pushback precisely because audiences cannot seem to distinguish between her actual and onstage selves, Schumer is able to inhabit the classic “bawd” persona, pushing the envelope in racially and sexually charged contexts.⁹ Although she has her share of detractors, the criticism Schumer receives generally has been categorical—i.e., from people opposed to women telling “dirty jokes”—whereas opposition to Silverman seemed to arise

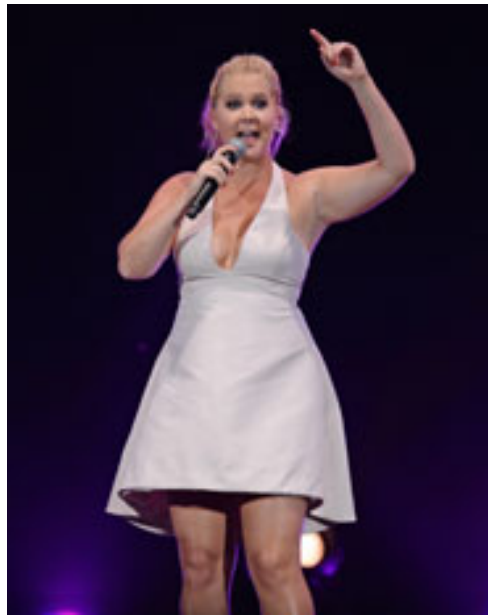


FIGURE 4.1: Amy Schumer performs during the Oddball Comedy Show at The Perfect Vodka Amphitheater on October 3, 2015 in West Palm Beach Florida. Storms Media Group / Alamy Stock Photo.

due to audiences' inability to see her controversial material as material; her deadpan delivery indicated that she actually believed the racist and other material she performed. Like Silverman, however, Schumer can most accurately be described as a "new bawd" in the context of Fourth Wave feminism who combines the bawd and bitch postures both in the material she performs, and in her caustic responses to hecklers.

Whether gleefully describing her numerous sexual encounters with lines like, "You're gonna wanna wear this [condom]—I've had a busy month! It's like a petri dish right now . . ." (Schumer 2015), or venturing into the dangerous territory of rape jokes, Schumer adroitly uses humor to push boundaries. Following the "consensual" line referenced above for example, Schumer notes:

We've all been a *little* raped, o.k.—just a skosh—just a hair. Every girl I know has one night—usually in college—and she's like, "*Huh*. I think that was rape. Not *tots* consensh . . . I don't remember yelling 'Yes.' . . . It's not all black and white—there's a gray area of rape—like you've been graped, I can tell. Grape happens.

—Schumer 2014

Although Schumer may appear to be mocking rape victims, she is actually calling out rape culture, specifically the so-called “gray rape” sometimes used to implicate victims in their assaults. Schumer’s rhetorical legerdemain renders toxic masculinity the true butt of the joke in service of her larger social critique.¹⁰ The less than enthusiastic response from her audience suggests that for many, rape is simply unacceptable as the subject of a joke. Unlike the rape joke told by Sarah Silverman in her breakout 2005 performance, *Jesus is Magic* (“I was raped by a doctor—which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl”), which elicits considerable audience laughter in part because “It looks like her face isn’t in on her own jokes” (Anderson 2005), Schumer’s “grape” joke receives a far less favorable response, perhaps due to audiences’ perception that Amy-the-person should know better. Where Silverman’s comedy and her identity are conflated, Schumer’s are not. As I have recently noted, “whereas Silverman seems oblivious about the offensive potential of her discourse, Schumer performs with a rhetorical wink, communicating to the audience that she knows her persona is a construction” (Gilbert 2018: 213). Feigning innocence through quizzical looks, Schumer offers audiences “a gendered ‘ditz’ performance, a parodic performance of femininity” (Goltz 2015: 272). Unlike Silverman, Schumer appears aware that she is performing parodically.

Further, as have countless bawds before her, Schumer capitalizes on the historic relationship between sensuality and physical size. At times accused of body-shaming by critics due to the perceived contradiction between her nod to self-acceptance and jokes or comments about her own and others’ weight, most recently evident in the tepid critical response to her film, *I Feel Pretty* (featuring Schumer as a large woman who, due to a brain injury, thinks she’s a supermodel), Schumer nevertheless continues to foreground her size in both onstage and offstage contexts. During an appearance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, for example, she declares, “I’m what you look like if you have pasta and wine.” When Colbert replies, “Which is absolutely beautiful, by the way,” Schumer stands up, struts the stage, and proudly proclaims, “I know, I’m blessed,” to cheers and applause from the audience (Schumer 2018a). Schumer’s hyperbolic body-positive flourish is a significant departure from the self-deprecatory strategy she has used onstage in lines such as “It takes me ninety minutes to look this mediocre” (Schumer 2012). Her ability to navigate between her comedic persona and her “real” self contributes to Schumer’s immense popularity; “she is not her act, and audiences recognize this” (Gilbert 2018: 213). In fact, during an interview with Gayle King on *CBS This Morning*, Schumer explains: “When I started, I was playing a character—when I started doing stand-up—it was like this real bubbly, irreverent girl who didn’t really know anything was wrong with what she was saying.” Claiming, “It wasn’t me—it was like me making fun of someone who’s ya know, privileged and racist,” Schumer points out that, “Now, I’m as close to myself as I’ve ever been

onstage” (Schumer 2018b).¹¹ Clearly, Amy Schumer believes that audiences have always been able to distinguish between her on and offstage personae; moving forward as a seasoned, confident comic, she is taking a risk by blurring this boundary, with all of the courage and vulnerability such a rhetorical move entails.

THE MARGINAL PERFORMANCE OF WANDA SYKES

Another comic who seems comfortable performing her autobiography at this point in her career is Wanda Sykes, whose most recent publicity was her announcement that she was leaving her position as a producer on the reboot of *Roseanne*, after the notorious tweet. As a veteran who has been practicing her art for over thirty years, Wanda Sykes is perhaps best described as a “rhetorical shape-shifter” whose seamless merging of bitch, bawd, and reporter postures enables her to “engage audiences in a nonconfrontational and nonthreatening manner” (Gilbert 2017: 63). Beginning her comedic career with fairly traditional



FIGURE 4.2: Comedian Wanda Sykes on stage during Wanda Sykes at the HBO & AEG Live’s “The Comedy Festival” 2007 at Caesars Palace on November 17, 2007 in Las Vegas, Nevada. Photo by Jason Merritt / FilmMagic.

material, including “dick jokes,” long the coin of the realm for male comics, Sykes consistently has mined her own experience, telling jokes about her identity first in the context of relationships with men, and since coming out publicly as a lesbian in 2008, in her more recent bits focusing on her wife and kids.¹² Much of her now-classic material examines and subverts the power dynamics inherent in any discussion of race, gender, and sexuality. For example, one of the most famous bits from her 2006 HBO special, *Wanda Sykes: Sick and Tired*, ends with a rape joke that garners a much bigger audience response than those of either Silverman or Schumer.

Sykes begins the bit with a novel premise, asking the audience, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our pussies were detachable?” The crowd roars, and Sykes proceeds to spin out a fantasy scenario “in which women are safe because they are, in her words, ‘pussyless’” (Gilbert 2015: 57). Expertly exploring the fear women often feel, Sykes enumerates the virtues of detachment from the very physiology that makes them vulnerable to sexual assault. Receiving an enthusiastic response throughout this routine, Sykes garners the biggest laughs at a point during which she details some of the logistics such detachment would necessarily entail in a putative call to her friend:

Hey! I’m sor—I’m sorry to wake you. Huh? Un-uh, no I’m still out on my date! Mm-hm! Girl, we are havin’ a *good* time! I didn’t know it was going to be this much fun! Look, do me a favor. Run by my house and grab my pussy. It’s in the shoebox on the top shelf.

Later in the bit, Sykes contrasts her friend’s ostensible loyalty with that of a male partner who observes, “You, uh, going out with your girlfriends, uh . . . Guess you can, uh . . . leave your pussy at home. *I’ll* watch it!” Ultimately focusing on the betrayal of her partner, Sykes uses a rape joke to end this bit:

You get home . . . Pussy all bent out of shape! “What is this?!? . . . Jackass! Can’t trust you with shit! Now I’ma have to put it in the dryer—reshape it! I better put a Bounce in there.” Your guy’s standing there: “Uh . . . some of the fellas came by.”

Both the live audience reaction and six years of YouTube fan responses (2006–12) suggest that despite the fact that her final punchline features an allusion to gang rape, Sykes succeeds where other comics fail due at least in part to her consummate ability to create identification with her audience, as well as audience recognition of the social critique underlying this routine (Gilbert 2015).

The comment of one female fan on YouTube, “Love it too funny and kind of true” is emblematic of the way Sykes’ humor affects women. Numerous comments attest to the fact that for many of Sykes’ female fans, her ability to

critique rape culture via a rape joke is a strategy they appreciate precisely because they identify as possible victims. For example, one fan explains:

I don't think you have to be woman to understand it, but I think it definitely enhances how funny it is. I don't want to turn a joke into something serious, but it's something that affects women in a lot more ways than is immediately noticeable. GIRLS don't even realize how much it affects their lives until they stop and think about it because it becomes a habit and "normal" to think that way. I think the joke is great because she is really pointing out how ridiculous it is.

—Gilbert 2015: 60¹³

This particular fan's tacit understanding of the way contemporary culture normalizes rape allows her to see Sykes' joke as a welcome exposure of the absurd challenges women must navigate on a daily basis.

Whereas the majority of YouTube comments from female fans are effusive, comments from males, however, evidence a troubling pattern of vitriol and raw misogyny.¹⁴ Pejorative comments denigrating Sykes, others vilifying all women, and in particular those attacking specific female commentators, indicate that for male viewers, the perceived congruence between Sykes' on- and offstage selves renders her searing indictment of rape culture inherently threatening, even emasculating. Although several female viewers' YouTube comments are negative, these are limited to Sykes' comedic ability, while racist, sexist, and homophobic derision seem unique to male commentary. And whereas both male and female commentators challenge racist comments made by others, rebutting misogyny is left only to "a few female fans, generally those engaged in direct dialog with the offending party" (Gilbert 2015: 62). Ultimately, like other high-profile feminists, Sykes is the target of "rhetorical abuse stunning in both scope and intensity" for daring to condemn rape culture (Gilbert 2015: 66).¹⁵

From her classic bit on "coming out black" to more recent material about the exhaustion of parenting, Sykes remains a masterful shapeshifter. By using the rhetorical strategies of the bitch, bawd, and reporter postures, she creates identification with her audience in service of her trenchant cultural critique. Indeed, as she confidently dispenses wisdom masked as entertainment, Sykes exemplifies the potential for marginalized comedic identities to subvert the hegemonic narrative, exposing inequities and absurdities, leaving only laughter in her wake. As an African American, lesbian feminist comic, Sykes cloaks ideology in irony, telling hard truths in a manner most audiences find not only palatable, but hilarious.

Humor is, by its very nature, mercurial; as jokes simultaneously advance agendas and disavow their own rhetorical potency, they disarm audiences, eliciting laughter. Do contemporary comics deploy their onstage personae to

support or resist existing social structures? Does comic intent matter when the audience is always the ultimate arbiter of humor? And how can humor that some consider racist, sexist, or homophobic actually serve as subversive cultural critique? Certainly, comics Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes use rape jokes to call out rape culture, creating audience identification and contesting patriarchal constructs through their popular stand-up routines. Another medium that provides rich terrain for exploring the relationship between comedy and identity is the television sitcom. Specifically, two Emmy-Award winning series, *The Big Bang Theory* and *Modern Family*, afford ample opportunity to examine the way humor based on stereotypes can be seen as both regressive and transgressive.

GENDER AND POWER IN POPULAR SITCOMS

TV sitcoms have long focused on the turbulent relationship between gender and power, primarily through depictions of romantic couples. From Ralph and Alice Kramden to Cam and Mitchell Pritchett, sitcom pairs have gained popularity through their exaggerated navigation of the mundane issues all couples face: communication, sex, and family dynamics. And although the treatment of gender inequities has evolved over the years, sitcoms nevertheless continue to foreground conflict—generally between dating or married couples—as inevitable, entertaining, and easily resolved in 21 minutes or less. Whether current sitcoms offer new relational models is debated by scholars and lay critics alike. Perhaps a more interesting concern, however, is the way contemporary sitcoms employ a variety of rhetorical strategies to use humor as cultural critique.

Both my taxonomy of comedic postures and the work of Simmons and Rich (2013) provide useful lenses for examining gender and power relations in TV sitcoms. The bawd and the bitch are popular personae not only with female stand-up comics, but as characters developed in the context of sitcoms as well. As in stand-up, these personae allow sitcom characters a full rhetorical arsenal at their disposal. The bawd, imbued with insatiable lust and happy to brag about her sexscapades, illustrates one type of female power, while the bitch—unafraid to condemn misogyny—depicts another, as she wears her mantle with pride. Both the bawd and the bitch are longstanding types, enduring as examples of female comic agency across generations and media.

Investigating gender representation in sitcoms over a fifty-year period (1952–2004), Simmons and Rich note that although women's roles have changed, “they have failed to meaningfully alter traditional masculine narratives” but rather, “what has been won is a superficial role reversal—unthreatening and, thus, ultimately allowed by capitalism—with sitcoms portraying men as children and women as mothers responsible for disciplining them” (2013: 2). Beginning in the 1980s, Simmons and Rich explain, this development cast women as “fun-killers,” judged both on their femininity and their maternal fitness. Unlike the

authoritarian males of earlier sitcoms, who although fallible, remained loveable, fun-killing females are portrayed as shrill and domineering, able to transgress traditional gender roles, but only if they sacrifice fun and/or femininity. While men in sitcoms become “childish pleasure-seekers” attempting to resist emasculation by their wives (2013: 7), women in these shows are both demonized for daring to venture into male/masculine territory and held responsible for their husbands’ buffoonery. Although they have access to resources, education, and employment with the attendant power these provide, Simmons and Rich maintain, in the context of their romantic relationships, sitcom women remain in stasis.

As Walsh et al. (2008) note, despite the fact that female characters in sitcoms may be portrayed as intelligent and independent, they are nevertheless constrained by traditional gender roles as the containment of their agency through both characterization and setting is inevitable. Maintaining that women in sitcoms, particularly those in “mismatched” relationships with men who are neither as smart nor attractive as they (e.g., *King of Queens*) are caught in a “postfeminist trap,” Walsh et al. suggest that ultimately, “Sexist story lines . . . become commodified nostalgic packages” (2008: 131). Humor is not subversive in this context, they argue, because comedy is only used “to mollify patriarchy and trivialize . . . feminist empowerment” (2008: 132). Because the men on these shows are never required to change, even when they admit their wrongdoing, Walsh et al. contend, women are obligated to accept their husbands on their own terms as the males are invariably redeemed. The troubling message sent by this resolution, Walsh et al. explain, is that Second Wave feminism has empowered women, but only enough to concede their true agency to the loveable buffoons who are their partners.

An alternate reading of the way humor is used in these sitcoms, however, is—as in the stand-up routines discussed earlier—as subversive cultural critique. When female characters make jokes at the expense of male characters, the men are the victims, and patriarchy, itself is the butt. Failure to recognize that by lampooning and lambasting their loveable buffoons, female characters in sitcoms launch an implicit critique of sexist practices such as male entitlement and privilege, is taking comedy literally, ignoring its ability to frame gendered issues in complex and nuanced ways. Indeed, it is precisely critics’ inability to distinguish between the victims and butts of jokes that results in the condemnation of both stand-up routines and sitcoms on ideological bases.¹⁶

SEXIST OR SUBVERSIVE? *THE BIG BANG THEORY*

Throughout its twelve-season run, *The Big Bang Theory* (BBT) won seventy awards (from 242 nominations), including ten Emmy Awards and a Golden



FIGURE 4.3: “The Consummation Deviation.” Rajesh Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar), Bernadette (Melissa Rauch), Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg), Amy Farrah Fowler (Mayim Bialik), Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons), Penny (Kaley Cuoco), and Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki). *The Big Bang Theory*, Thursday, November 8 (8:00–8:31 pm, ET/PT) on the CBS Television Network. Photo by Sonja Flemming / CBS via Getty Images.

Globe.¹⁷ The show features a group of friends, the core of whom are four scientists at Cal-Tech: theoretical physicist Sheldon Cooper, experimental physicist Leonard Hofstadter, aeronautical engineer Howard Wolowitz, and astrophysicist Raj Koothrappali. Portrayed as stereotypical nerds, inhabitants of a version of what sociologist Michael Kimmel (2008) calls “Guyland,” the quartet of brilliant scientists spend their free time playing video games, frequenting a comic book store, and gradually increasing their social interaction with women.¹⁸ Added to this mix is Penny, the aspiring actor across the hall whose day job is as a server at a Cheesecake Factory restaurant (in early seasons). Ultimately, Penny and Leonard’s on-again/off-again relationship results in marriage, and the two other female principals, microbiologist Bernadette Rostenkowski and neuroscientist Amy Farrah Fowler, date, then marry Howard and Sheldon, respectively.

Female characters on *BBT* can be seen as bawds, bitches, and fun-killers. Focused on her sexual history and defined by her physical appearance, Penny is

a bawd who fulfills the “blonde bimbo” stereotype. As the show progresses, however, it is often Penny’s relational communication skills that win the day, especially in matters pertaining to the always awkward and challenging Sheldon. Although Penny is painted as less intelligent than the others, it is her “street smarts” and willingness to confront issues that make her invaluable to the gang. Exulting in the power of her bawdy charm, Penny frequently uses her attractiveness to get what she wants and needs. She and Leonard may be mismatched in terms of both intellect and appearance, but she is clearly in control—of both Leonard and virtually any man with whom she interacts, including Sheldon.

Bernadette is the classic bitch. Smart and outspoken, she often bellows her lines in raucous tones incongruous with her diminutive physical presence. In keeping with the bitch tradition, “Bernie” is aggressive and confrontational. As a perfect foil to Penny’s bawd, Bernadette is less concerned with relational skills than she is with hierarchies, including the power dynamic in her marriage to Howard in which she is the primary earner. With a “take no prisoners” rhetorical style, Bernadette is tough, caustic, and calculating. Most definitely a fun-killer, she frequently mocks Howard’s “toys,” and impedes or even derails his plans when they involve “playing” with his friends. Unlike Penny who flaunts her physical attractiveness at every turn, Bernadette uses her professional success not only as a source of empowerment, but also as a way to control Howard, as she attempts to keep his frivolous spending in check.

Like Bernadette, Amy is a talented and successful scientist. Neither the bawd nor the bitch, Amy exhibits characteristics of another of my five female comedic postures—the kid. She is portrayed, especially early on, as asexual, which is why she provides the perfect counterpart to Sheldon. Foregrounding her consummate cognitive ability, she requires initiation into the world of dating and sexuality—tutelage that Penny, with assistance from Bernadette, is only too happy to provide. Even in her manner of dress—plaid skirts and baggy sweaters—Amy projects a child-like innocence. Her asexuality makes her nonthreatening, which is why she is able to maintain a relationship with Sheldon. And although she is the instigator of the romance that eventually blossoms between them, Amy’s patience throughout their five years of dating is due, in part, to her own inhibitions about physical intimacy. Increasingly bold both emotionally and physically, Amy is able to teach Sheldon how to be a boyfriend—one who ultimately proposes.

All three of the female principals in *BBT* can be seen as fun-killers to an extent, primarily because their male counterparts are depicted as unruly and mischievous children. Although Bernadette may be the most explicitly drawn fun-killer in terms of using her power and authority to rein in Howard’s excesses, both Penny and Amy also serve in this capacity as they bear the responsibility of managing their romantic relationships and their romantic partners. Because in the context of the show’s male characters, Leonard often

plays the role of fun-killer himself—especially in his relationship with Sheldon, for whom he serves as a surrogate parent—Penny is perhaps less likely than either Amy or Bernadette to manage her partner by killing his fun.

Clearly, the female characters in *BBT* derive power in myriad ways. Heather McIntosh (2014) warns us not to be complacent in this regard, however, as she notes that even though the female scientists on the show evidence progress in sitcom depiction of women due to their intellect, credentials, accomplishments, and defiance of traditional gender roles, these portrayals ultimately are used in service of entertainment and, consequently, reaffirm hegemonic values.

The male characters—both on *BBT* and in contemporary sitcoms in general—use their roles as fun-killers and buffoons to navigate the vicissitudes of relational life while remaining focused on their own often child-like needs. Indeed, as referenced above, the male characters in *BBT* are portrayed as children; despite their towering intellects, they frequently exhibit behavior usually seen in middle and high school boys. As Kimmel explains regarding Guyland, “In this topsy-turvy, Peter Pan mindset, young men shirk the responsibilities of adulthood and remain fixated on the trappings of boyhood, while the boys they still are struggle heroically to prove that they are real men despite all evidence to the contrary” (2008: 4). Constantly in competition with one another, the “lost boys” on *BBT* jockey for position in both their professional and personal lives. Whether it is devising a new theory (Sheldon), going into space (Howard), or dating a desirable woman (Leonard), the male characters vie for the alpha male position, all the while painfully aware that as nerds, they do not measure up to classic ideals of manliness. Although as Margaret Weitekamp (2015) suggests, the show portrays scientists with affection and nuance, relying heavily on the cultural traditions of nerds, geeks, and mad scientists, Jonathan McIntosh (2017b) points out that “many people involved with geeky subcultures tend to dislike the show” because it is “essentially one long joke at their expense.” The central male characters both embody and lampoon geek culture as they variously perform the role of fun-killer and buffoon, a comedic type with a rich history dating to the second century AD (Welsford 1935).

Sheldon is the ultimate fun-killer due to his complete lack of social interaction skills. Although he is narcissistic and given to blurt inappropriate observations at inopportune moments, his friends teach him how to navigate situations and relationships, even becoming fiercely protective of him on occasion. Leonard, Penny, and Amy are Sheldon’s most frequent interlocuters, and despite the stress they endure when dealing with him, they love him and are consequently accepting when he squelches their plans, effectively killing the fun. Sheldon is child-like in his innocence, and has a tendency to reveal his true thoughts, even when the truth might hurt others; he is far from a loveable buffoon, however, as clowning is left to the other male characters.

As mentioned above, Leonard can be a fun-killer in his “management” of the other men on the show. He can also be a buffoon in certain contexts, particularly in his relationship with Penny. Asthmatic and lactose intolerant, Leonard uses self-deprecating humor to make himself the butt of many jokes. Always conscious that he is a physical mismatch for Penny, Leonard articulates his shortcomings (one of them being that he is shorter than Penny) as a way to beat others to the punch. At times playing the sad clown, Leonard is more often the “straight man” to both Penny and Sheldon, serving as conduit for their humor.

Howard and Raj are both buffoons, at times, in tandem. As the two “otherized” male characters—Howard because he is Jewish, and Raj because he is Indian—their humor is grounded in their marginal status. Howard’s relationship with his domineering mother, Debbie who never appears onscreen, but yells at Howard constantly, parallels Raj’s relationship with his indulgent parents, Dr. and Mrs. V.M. Koothrapali, who appear onscreen via Skype, as both Howard and Raj remain in a state of dependency. The death of Howard’s mother and the decision of Raj’s father to cut him off financially are catalysts that propel the two out of “adulthood” (Kimmel 2008: 25). Much of the humor involving Howard and Raj centers on the homoerotic undercurrent in their close friendship. Portrayed as effeminate, Raj often speaks of his penchant for pampering and “chick flicks,” acting like a jealous lover when Howard rejects him in any capacity, especially once he begins dating Bernadette.

Because he is an engineer without a PhD, Howard is often the target of Sheldon’s cutting remarks. Additionally, in the first several seasons of the show, Howard is ridiculed by the others for his lothario instincts and actions. After he meets Bernadette and begins to assume the trappings of adulthood, Howard becomes the butt of Bernadette’s jokes, and even his own, as he engages in the strategic use of self-deprecation. Throughout the show, Howard plays the buffoon, often employing physical comedy (haircut, clothing, exaggerated facial expressions, vocal range, and gestures) in his clowning, and ultimately, remaining the naughty boy his wife must discipline.

Of all the male characters on *BBT*, Raj is the most consistent buffoon. As the constant butt of others’ jokes, Raj is mocked in early seasons for his inability to talk to women while sober, and as the show progresses, for his lack of a girlfriend. Second only to Stuart, the comic book store owner in his self-designated “loser” status, Raj is frequently taunted about his feminized gender presentation as well as his ethnic marginality. McIntosh (2017b) is not surprised that “the character most ridiculed for being the most unmanly in a group of men specifically coded to be unmanly, is also the only man of color on the show,” noting that, “As such Raj fits neatly into Hollywood’s long-running tradition of mocking and diminishing the sexuality of asian [*sic*] men.”

From his mismatched and outdated clothing to the attention he lavishes on his dog, Cinnamon, Raj plays the fool, serving as the butt of countless jokes,

especially those leveled by Howard. The lone bachelor among the central male characters, Raj is neither imbued with the same level of gravitas as the others nor given the same attention in the series' plots. Rather, as a loveable and reliable buffoon, Raj takes the rhetorical pratfalls that keep the audience laughing.

Comedic personae such as the bawd, bitch, kid, fun-killer, and buffoon provide useful lenses to help us discern specific rhetorical strategies for performing comic identity in the context of TV sitcoms.¹⁹ Examining the rhetorical features of this particular comedic discourse affords insight not only into the way humor works, but *why* it matters. As discussed earlier, humor is a unique discursive form that simultaneously serves as entertainment and cultural critique. Having identified how specific comic personae function within the show, we can now turn to the real work that humor accomplishes.

In his compelling video essay, Jonathan McIntosh (2017a) examines *BBT* with a construct he calls "Adorkable Misogyny." He explains that this phenomenon features "male characters whose geeky version of masculinity is framed as both comically pathetic and endearing," and that this is problematic because "it's their status as nerdy nice guys that lets them off the hook for a wide range of creepy, entitled, and downright sexist behaviors." Noting that *BBT* was the most popular series on TV in 2016, according to the Nielsen ratings (averaging almost 20 million viewers per episode), McIntosh explains that in the tradition of the geeky hero of TV and film, the central male characters on *BBT* are framed as more sensitive and smarter than their macho peers—the "nice guys" misunderstood, unfairly mocked, and bullied. Pointing out that geek characters routinely stalk, harass, and even assault women, but that the "adorkable" part of this equation makes the trope both insidious and dangerous, McIntosh contends that portrayals such as Howard as "the creepy pervert with a heart of gold," Raj, "the sensitive guy turned obnoxious inappropriate drunk," Leonard, "the 'nice guy' enabler," or Sheldon, "the innocent bigot," excuse the sexist behavior in which these characters regularly engage.

According to McIntosh (2017b), unacceptable behavior is rendered acceptable, even endearing through the technique of "ironic lampshading," a strategy that calls attention to sexism with a rhetorical wink, as though merely acknowledging the practice excuses it. In this way, "the writers attempt to duck any criticism by pointing out the sexism inherent in their own jokes themselves" (McIntosh 2017a). Adorkable Misogyny seems to be predicated on a perverse syllogism: (1) geeks are harmless; (2) Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj are geeks; (3) therefore, Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj (even as adorkable misogynists) are harmless. McIntosh disputes this logic, maintaining that the "boys will be boys" truism at the heart of the Adorkable Misogyny trope actually means "boys will be sexist." Normalizing and enabling behaviors such as stalking and harassment, McIntosh suggests, is the real danger of Adorkable Misogyny.

Although McIntosh makes an important contribution to our understanding of the complex permutations of masculinity portrayed in popular culture, he also makes the mistake of treating comedy seriously. By assuming that *BBT* endorses the values that it critiques through humor, McIntosh fails to see the show *as* humor. An alternate reading of his perspective is one that sees the Adorkable Misogyny of the central male characters as funny precisely because their behavior consistently spoofs hegemonic masculinity. Even as McIntosh acknowledges that the geeks on the show are both reactions to and critiques of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity, he argues that any real critique is lost in the depiction of the male characters' relentless pursuit of "traditional expectations of manhood" (McIntosh 2017b). Asserting that "one of the ways men learn to perform manhood is by exerting power over others," and that engaging in "hypermasculine competition" (2017b) prevents heterosexual males from showing caring or vulnerability, McIntosh fails to recognize key components of humor: first, Superiority Theory teaches us that jokes are inevitably competitions with clear winners and losers; someone or some group is ultimately "up" and another individual or group is "down" at the end of the punchline. Second, humor exposes vulnerability; after all, what makes someone more vulnerable than being the object of a joke? Consequently, rather than seeing the *BBT* men as hypocritical bullying nerds, victims of each other's rhetorical abuse, we can appreciate the way humor on this show works subversively.

McIntosh (2017b) claims that the jokes in *BBT* "aren't designed to challenge or subvert the limiting and often toxic ideas about what it means to be a 'real man.' Instead, the punchlines reinforces [*sic*] this notion that guys who aren't physically strong, tough or athletic are unmanly and therefore worthy of ridicule." Yet, he also acknowledges that "with all comedy it's important to ask: who are we meant to laugh with and who are we meant to laugh at?" Indeed, humor scholars frequently focus on this question; in the case of *BBT*, understanding the subversive work that humor accomplishes in this series hinges upon distinguishing between the victims and butts of jokes. Of course, as in all aspects of humor, "Whether the victim is the same as the butt . . . depends entirely upon audience identification and interpretation" (Gilbert 2004: 160). When Leonard is derided for being unathletic or Raj is belittled as effeminate, considering them both victims and butts of these jokes supports McIntosh's thesis. Realizing that they are the victims of the jokes in the context of the show, but that the butt of these jokes is actually hegemonic masculinity, itself, however, enables us to see how the humor in *BBT* can serve as a means of rejecting rather than reifying traditional gendered narratives. Understanding the difference between the victims and butts of jokes helps counter critiques of *Modern Family* as well.

HOW MODERN IS *MODERN FAMILY*?

Now in its eleventh and final season, *Modern Family* (MF) is currently the “longest-running comedy series” on ABC.²⁰ From its 361 nominations, the show has received 117 awards, including twenty-two Primetime Emmy Awards, six Writers Guild of America Awards, a GLSEN Respect Award, a Peabody Award, and a Golden Globe Award.²¹ The show revolves around three families: navigating the vicissitudes of their relational lives, the Pritchetts, Dunphys, and Tucker-Pritchetts intersect, connect, and clash at both logistical and emotional levels. Stereotypes—the currency of comedy—abound: Jay, the aging, arrogant-but-loveable curmudgeon, Gloria, the uber-sexy trophy wife, and Manny, their wunderkind and one-and-only prior to the arrival of “oops baby,” Joe; Claire, the dissatisfied control freak, Phil, the sensitive new age guy always in the midst of a mid-life crisis, Haley, the ditzy, popular, and promiscuous daughter, Alex, the nerdy brainiac, and Luke, the least likely to excel at anything. Rounding out this bunch are Mitch, the repressed and anxiety-ridden



FIGURE 4.4: (L–R) Ed O’Neill, Sofia Vergara, Ariel Winter, Sarah Hyland, Rico Rodriguez, Nolan Gould, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Julie Bowen, Ty Burrell, and Eric Stonestreet. *Modern Family*—“A Tale of Three Cities.” Tuesday, September 21 (9:00–9:31 pm EDT) on Walt Disney Television Network. Peter “Hopper” Stone / Walt Disney Television via Getty Images.

attorney, Cam, the histrionic football coach with farm-boy roots, and Lily, the acerbic adoptee.

Framed as a mockumentary, the show makes extensive use of close-ups during which characters address the camera directly; and unlike most sitcoms, no laugh track is present. The central female characters on *MF* inhabit either the bitch or bawd persona. Epitomizing the fun-killer, Claire plays the bitch who metes out discipline to keep her household running smoothly both before and after she returns to work outside of the home. Explicitly bemoaning the fact that Phil is fun and adored by the kids while she is the taskmaster, begrudgingly obeyed, Claire frequently devises plans to recapture her halcyon days, whether becoming her alter-ego, Julianna to Phil's Clive in order to reignite their sexual passion or planning activities and vacations where mandatory fun will be had by all. Although she resists the label of fun-killer, her compulsion to control others keeps Claire firmly in the bitch camp.

Gloria, on the other hand, exemplifies the bawd. Always clad in tight outfits that emphasize her voluptuous physique, specifically her ample cleavage, Gloria exudes sensuality with every move. Additionally, her Colombian ethnicity renders her the exotic "Other," the hot-tempered, volatile, but always titillating head-turner who keeps Jay in line at least in part due to her physical endowments. Because of her aggressive, confrontational nature, Gloria is sometimes a bitch and, occasionally a fun-killer as she monitors and organizes the lives of her husband and sons. Usually, however, Gloria foregrounds her femaleness; as the object of male desire and female envy, her hyperbolic and often parodic gender representation is frequently the subject of jokes on the show.

Even the young women on the show, Claire's daughters, Haley and Alex, play the bawd and the bitch respectively. While Haley flaunts her good looks and drops out of college during her first year, Alex builds robots, but remains deeply insecure about her sex appeal. Haley is a girl who just wants to have fun, and Alex is a fun-killer. Throughout the series, Haley gets the guys, and Alex gets the grades; as perfect foils for one another, each covets what the other seems to come by naturally. Instantly recognizable to audiences, these two classic female comedic postures endure.

Like those on *BBT*, the central male characters on *MF* include both buffoons and fun-killers. Jay is an interesting admixture; his stern exterior generally labels him a fun-killer, especially regarding Phil, always too eager to bond with his father-in-law and win his approval. Jay can also be a buffoon, however, in contexts such as his Botox injections going awry or his becoming inebriated and uninhibited in a gay bar. Like Sheldon in *BBT*, Jay makes sexist, racist, and homophobic comments throughout the show. And like Sheldon, Jay is not only tolerated despite his bigotry, but valued for his other qualities. Accustomed to being in charge, Jay frequently kills the fun by issuing directives or quashing others' plans, particularly Phil's. By rebuffing Phil's many attempts

to connect with him, Jay effectively kills the fun, maintaining his curmudgeon persona.

Phil is Jay's antithesis, a playful, endearing buffoon whose major flaw is trying too hard. Whether inventing outrageous gadgets or attempting to master what he perceives to be his kids' slang, Phil consistently puts wholehearted effort into every endeavor. As part of a mismatched couple, Phil is often portrayed as an embarrassment to Claire, and to his daughters as well. Only his son, Luke seems to be Phil's kindred spirit as the two play and create together in ways those outside of the dyad find absurd. As Peter Pan to Claire's Wendy, Phil takes literal pratfalls incessantly, inevitably reined in, admonished, and controlled by his wife. Earnest, loyal, and sensitive to a fault, Phil cries easily, and along with Cam, provides much of the physical comedy on the show.

Cam is clearly the biggest buffoon on *MF*. Large in stature and given to donning the costume of his alter-ego, Fitzbo the clown, Cam is frequently the victim of pratfalls and other physical comedy. In an early episode, Cam falls into a kiddie pool and walks into a sliding glass door. His exaggerated gestures and movements imbue him with a clownishness even when he is not actually in costume. Flamboyant and sometimes bordering on hysteria, Cam is depicted as both effeminate in affect and masculine in background (e.g., football and farming). Mitch occasionally refers to Cam as "she," indicating that in their relationship, Cam plays a feminine role. This label is supported in episodes that feature Cam as the nurturing "housewife," cooking, tending to Lily, even considered part of a group of mothers by both members and onlookers. In a reversal of Simmons and Rich's binary, Cam-as-the-feminine-partner is the buffoon, and Mitch-as-the-masculine-partner is the fun-killer.

Like his sister, Claire, Mitch is highly adept at killing the fun. Tightly wound and insecure, Mitch is typically embarrassed, even mortified by Cam's behavior in much the same way Claire is irritated by Phil's exploits. Cam is creative; Mitch is practical. Cam is overly dramatic; Mitch is uncomfortably staid. Cam is childlike both in his direct, emotionally labile rhetorical style, and his tendency to pout when he does not get his way. Conversely, Mitch is manipulative and cerebral, sacrificing spontaneity for reliability. In the ninth season, Cam and Mitch realize that one inextricable bond they share is their experience of having been bullied repeatedly by older sisters. For both the buffoon and the fun-killer, this is not only a revelation, but also a convenient scapegoat for their conflict styles.

Although Simmons and Rich apply the construct of the fun-killer exclusively to female characters, it is clear that along with playing the buffoon, male characters in sitcoms can be fun-killers as well. Indeed, it is the contrast between fun-killers and buffoons rather than the biological sex or gender identity of either that remains integral to the way relational dynamics play out in comedic contexts. This contrast applies whether the characters are marginalized by an

identity marker (e.g., ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation) or are members of the dominant culture such as Jay and Phil.

Despite the immense popularity of *MF*, the show has received pushback from both scholars and lay critics regarding its depiction of modernity. The “modern” descriptor is generally assumed to pertain to the family configurations depicted on the show: the portrayal of two “nontraditional” couples—Jay and Gloria who are intergenerational and of different ethnicities, as well as blended by virtue of second marriages and step-parenting, and Cam and Mitch, a same-sex dyad. Although traditional in their family composition, even Claire and Phil are ostensibly part of the “modern” equation, as Claire must negotiate the challenges arising from interactions with her father’s “second” family. If modern means nontraditional, both the Pritchetts and the Tucker-Pritchetts qualify as modern at the logistical level. This is not the level critics cite as problematic, however; rather, it is the message sent by the traditional and even conservative representation of characters.

Although *MF* may purport to be modern and realistic, LaVecchia (2011) contends, rather than subvert the stultifying nature of conservative “family values,” the show consistently reifies heteronormative domesticity, especially in the context of the Dunphy family. It is precisely because the show is not modern, LaVecchia maintains, that in 2011, *MF* was widely regarded as a favorite of conservatives. Extending this critique, Doran (2013) explains that although *MF* engages with progressive issues, it actually reinforces traditional values, particularly troubling in the depiction of Cam and Mitch’s relationship. Not only does the show fail to fulfill its “modern” promise/premise, Doran argues, but it domesticates homosexuality in order to render it palatable to mainstream audiences. This is dangerous, he notes, because “as a representational strategy, homodomesticity constructs a symbolic space that allows for the safe consumption of gay otherness by straight audiences while simultaneously protecting them from the threat of deviant gay sexual desire” (2013: 101).

Ultimately, these scholars warn, the portrayal of domesticity on the show serves as an insidious re-inscription of traditional—that is, patriarchal—discourse, most egregiously in the case of Claire Dunphy. For example, Nicolás-Gavilán points out that despite having all the perks of feminism—autonomy, education, employment—Claire ultimately chooses the classic feminine ideal—devotion to her family—over her own empowerment (Nicolás-Gavilán et al. 2015). This portrayal and others are problematic, Vuković suggests, because the show’s reliance on “outdated gender identities and stereotypes” normalizes and naturalizes traditional discourses of race, sexuality, and gender (2016: 65). As Staricek (2011) notes, when the status quo is simply reaffirmed, this ostensibly “modern” family is not so modern after all.

Clearly, the detractors of *MF* do not believe that the series accurately reflects the lived reality of modernity. Others see more complex rhetorical strategies at

work. Noting that “the formal conventions of a sitcom—such as comedic sensibility, predictability, general alignment with mainstream values, and conflict resolution in twenty-two minutes—formally restrict its subversive potential,” Andre Cavalcante (2015: 458) explains the merit of narratives that depict LGBTQ parents as “normal.” Discussing “anxious displacement,” the depiction of people who surround gay parents as different or symbolically excessive, Cavalcante argues that ultimately, shows like *MF* have the potential to affirm gay masculinities, validate gay parenting, and undermine homophobia.

Just as in the case of *BBT*, the critical pushback against *MF* is predicated on the belief that the show should mirror reality, as well as the assumption that the series endorses all values it depicts. Again, unwillingness to separate victims of jokes from butts of jokes results in a failure to recognize the implicit social critique at the heart of the show’s humor. Rather than clucking disapprovingly at Claire’s embrace of domesticity, we can see her character’s often inept handling of domestic life as lampooning the domestic sphere and its myriad constraints. Similarly, instead of framing Cam and Mitch’s relationship as a capitulation to heteronormativity, we can understand it as a critique of gay couples attempting to “pass” as straight, if not of heteronormativity, itself. Cavalcante is correct; sitcoms do not offer templates for overtly subversive discourse. Still, making cultural critique palatable, as humor does, is a good place to begin.

CONCLUSION

On June 25, 2018, Roseanne again apologized for her infamous tweet: “I apologize to anyone who thought, or felt offended and who thought that I meant something that I, in fact, did not mean,” she said on the podcast of Rabbi Shmuley Boteach. “I’m a lot of things, a loud mouth and all that stuff,” Barr continued tearfully, “But I’m not stupid for God’s sake. I never would have wittingly called any black person and say they are a monkey. I just wouldn’t do that. I didn’t do that. And people think that I did that and it just kills me. I’m just so sorry that I was so unclear and stupid” (Visser 2018). As she had previously, Barr referenced the Ambien she had taken prior to tweeting, claiming she did not know Jarrett was African American, bemoaning the fact that her apologies have not been accepted, and ruefully acknowledging, “I’ve made myself a hate magnet” (Visser 2018).²² Despite her self-recrimination, despite her tears, despite her legal settlement agreeing not to profit from the forthcoming ABC spinoff, *The Connors*, featuring the cast and crew of the *Roseanne* reboot minus Roseanne (Koblin 2018b), Barr is not likely to be forgiven by the American public anytime soon.

Indeed, Roseanne’s trespass was twofold: (1) even if she had been joking, she tweeted as Roseanne-the-person rather than articulating the comment onstage as a racist character; and (2) with that particular tweet, Roseanne simply went

too far. Even comedy has a line that if crossed, renders jokes simply mean-spirited or even obscene (e.g., Lenny Bruce was arrested; George Carlin was censured by the FCC; Andrew “Dice” Clay was banned from MTV). Being known as a professional joke-teller did not save Roseanne because her audience did not perceive the comment as a joke. Her punishment was immediate and merciless as public outcry led to professional catastrophe. It does not matter whether audiences believe Roseanne’s classic work was worthwhile; what matters is their willingness to consume or reject it—decisions based upon their perception of both her comedy and her identity.

Ultimately, the two questions raised at the beginning of this chapter continue to be explored by scholars and laypeople alike. Simultaneously able to contest and constrain, to resist and reify, to subvert and support, humor remains unique in its ability to accomplish this dichotomous rhetorical work. When stand-up comics assume particular postures onstage, employing specific strategies to create identification with their audiences, they levy acerbic cultural critique in the form of entertainment. Whether their words will be taken literally or as critique depends on the extent to which audiences conflate or separate comics from their onstage personae. When characters in sitcoms portray stereotypical personae, they too create humor in service of social critique. Stereotypes are cultural shorthand—easily identifiable and useful in comedic contexts as conduits for sexually and racially charged messages. Whether these messages are perceived as regressive or transgressive depends on the extent to which audiences conflate or separate the victims and butts of jokes. Always both challenging and reinforcing identities, humor is at bottom, a power-play. By allowing marginal identities temporarily to transcend their social condition (Gilbert 2004), humor can be the most liberating of rhetorical forms.

Is humor inherently radical or conservative? The answer is: Yes. Comic identities—whether in the context of stand-up comedy or TV sitcoms—create a carnivalesque atmosphere, a liminal space where the processes of demonization, inversion, and hybridization abound, and the temporary chaos that ensues is officially sanctioned (Stallybrass and White 1986). Indeed, comic disorder can only exist in contrast to the established order as “norms must first be established in order to be subverted” (Gilbert 2004: 61). As Bakhtin maintains: “carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (quoted in Stallybrass and White 1986: 7). Certainly, carnival is liberating, but it is also temporary. Radical in its rhetorical reframing of identities, and conservative in its ultimate affirmation of the status quo, comedy provides a context in which power dynamics can be explored, interrogated, and subverted all in the name of a good laugh.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Body

LOUISE PEACOCK

If, as other chapters in this volume have suggested, serious academic attention to comedy has been slow to develop, it is not unreasonable to suggest that physical comedy, sited in the body with minimal reliance on verbal wit, has long been regarded as the lowest of the low. Slapstick has rarely been analyzed in any detail and it is only in very recent years that popular forms of performance have been given any serious consideration in a way that focuses on what the performers actually do or did. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that comedy conveyed primarily through the body is indeed worthy of and repays analysis. In order to investigate the ways in which the body can be used to convey comedy, it will be necessary to establish a framework for identifying which physical comedy is created primarily by the writer and which is created primarily by the performer. This is not to suggest that there is no connection between the two, but one helpful distinction can be to think about comedy in terms of that which is written into the performance and that which is generated by the performer.

In the early days of cinema there was little distinction made between writers and performers, as the rising stars such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton wrote, directed, and performed their work and there is evidence in biographies and autobiographies from performers of early film comedy that much of the business was improvised on set as filming was taking place. This early development of mediatized comedy had its roots, as did so many of the performers, in vaudeville and music hall. Indeed, it is not too great a stretch to suggest that many of the tropes of physical comedy we recognize today have their origins in the acts seen in the popular light entertainment of the period preceding the one that concerns us here. The comic modes that make most of

physical comedy—such as circus, silent and sound film, music hall, sitcoms and sketch shows—have one thing in common: they are predominantly popular forms of performance. Whilst Oliver Double’s definition in *Popular Performance* applies primarily to popular theater, his assertion that popular performance is “from the wrong side of the Great Divide, seen as being low, disreputable and unworthy of serious attention” (Double 2017: 7) is highly relevant to the forms of performance considered in this chapter. They do not aspire to literary or intellectual heights. Instead, they create comedies which can be enjoyed by the widest audience possible.

As we move through the period under consideration, film comedy develops more of a separation between writer and performer, a separation even more present in theater comedy. In television comedy, many sketch shows, from Monty Python onwards, have been written and performed by the same team, but in the world of sitcom there is often a writing team, which operates separately from the performers. In the latter, writers may indicate specific uses of the body relating to the plot. So, particular comic devices such as hidden characters, disguise, mistaken identity, and rapid or coincidental entrances and exits will be scripted. These devices rely on the physical presence of the performer’s body for the comedy to be fully realized. Of course, the performer will have some flexibility as to exactly how the device is performed but they will have less influence than they do over other elements of comedy, which more directly relate to performance techniques. These performance techniques include such matters as facial expression, physicalization of character, timing of looks and gestures, and skill in the performance of stunts and comic violence. It should already be becoming clear that analyzing physical comedy is not a simple business. The polysemic nature of performance, within which so many things may be happening at once, also complicates the task. I might suggest that this area has been largely ignored, not because there is nothing to analyze but because there is so much to analyze that the task seems herculean.

The body is visible in almost all forms of comedy (with the exception of radio), so it is worth exploring here what is meant by the body in comedy. This chapter will focus on forms of comedy that prioritize the body but, as suggested above, it will also explore the way the body of the performer can be used to support humor the main source of which is verbal. This is not to imply that the body is not worthy of consideration in, say, stand-up comedy where, for example, one could contrast the way that Michael McIntyre and Jack Dee make use of their bodies as a component of their comedy. However, any consideration of those two comedians could not stop there. We would have to go on to consider the words spoken, the structure of jokes delivered, and the interplay between word and action. On the other hand, in the examples to be considered in this chapter, either words are not a factor in the way comedy is created or they are subservient to the body and its actions. Rowan Atkinson’s creation,

Mr. Bean, serves as a ready example of a comic performance in which the body conveys the comedy with hardly any words being spoken. Similarly, the more recent example of the bathroom scene from *Bridesmaids* qualifies for consideration because, even though the women speak, the actions and sound effects are the main signifiers for comedy, not the words. Similarly, performers such as Chaplin, Keaton, and Jim Carrey provide examples of comedy being created predominantly through the body.

The examples of comedy considered in this chapter are, therefore, best defined as physical comedy, and frequently involve elements of slapstick. There is no universally accepted definition of physical comedy, but I am using that label to identify comedy that creates humor and provokes laughter in which the signifiers of that comedy are predominantly visual and physical. Physical comedy places emphasis on the body of the performer or performers and on the actions and reactions of that body. When discussing silent comedy, film scholar Gerard Mast identifies that, “the essential comic object was the human body and its most interesting movements were running, jumping, riding, colliding, falling, staggering, leaping, twirling and flying” (1979: 24). Physical comedy is a comedy which relies on excess and super-exaggeration in both action and situation. It also prioritizes the body so that, even when action is combined with dialog, it is likely to be the action that remains in the memory of the audience rather than the dialog. Often the bodies that we observe engaged in this kind of comedy are in some way “other” from our own. These performative bodies are more flexible than our own and are stronger and more skilled. Also, these bodies can withstand more pain than ordinary bodies. “Othering” reinforces the distance between the performer and the viewer, a distance that helps create the space in which laughter can occur because the viewer is able to understand that the body engaging in physical action works in a different way to their own. This relieves them from the responsibility of feeling sympathy when the performing body is endangered.

I have considered the relationship between slapstick and physical comedy at length in *Slapstick and Comic Performance*, in which I offer the following definition of slapstick:

in order to be considered slapstick, a comedy, regardless of the media for which it is created should include all (or most) of the following: a central double act; comic pain and comic violence; falling and tripping; malicious props (the falling piano and the collapsing ladder); throwing of objects (often but not always food, particularly pies); and stunts and acrobatics.

—Peacock 2014: 31–2

Each of these criteria places the performer’s body as the central focus. The audience engages with the way in which that body responds to the world

around it, demonstrating skill or incompetence as it navigates the obstacles and challenges that present themselves. Slapstick involves placing the performer's body in a range of extreme situations, carrying out a range of extreme actions that would be avoided in everyday life. In this kind of comedy, the performer may be active or reactive. Often the performer finds him or herself in a difficult situation that places the body under some kind of duress. In many cases, the duress is created by the world in which the character exists. Think, for example, of Keaton's body struggling against the wind in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (dir. Charles Reisner 1928), in which duress is created by extreme weather, where according to film scholar Lisa Trahair, "he is literally swept along from one encounter to the next" (2007: 84). In *Liar! Liar!* (dir. Tom Shadyac 1997), Fletcher Reade, the character played by Jim Carrey, is placed in a difficult position by a birthday wish made by his young son. This wish ensures that Reade, a veteran liar, can only tell the truth, leading to a scene in which Reade beats himself up in the bathroom to try to avoid having to tell the truth in court. Occasionally, the duress is self-inflicted when it results either from incompetence or from over-indulgence. As these examples indicate, the connection between physical comedy and slapstick is clear. Alan Dale suggests that "the essence of a slapstick gag is a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero's dignity" (2000: 3) before going on to claim, "slapstick plays on our fears of physical and social maladjustment" (2000: 5). Not only does slapstick comedy communicate to an audience without the use of language, it speaks to universal concerns felt by all those watching it. As we watch the body of the performer demonstrate physical weakness or incompetence, we can imagine what such a physical experience might be like and are relieved to see this happening to somebody else. When the performer behaves deliberately badly and transgresses social codes, we may identify with having felt such desires and may feel liberated (with the safety that accompanies not being directly involved in the transgression) to see this kind of behavior.

The foregrounding of the body, at the beginning of the period covered by this volume, can readily be understood in terms of pragmatic necessity. Circus and silent film prioritize the body in the creation of a physical and visual comedy. Circuses toured internationally, meaning that clowns rarely spoke more than obvious catchphrases, keeping their acts focused on what could be communicated physically to guarantee that their work could be readily received as they traveled around Europe. In the United States, where language was less of a barrier, the rise of the three-ring big top ensured that clowns made very little use of language, as it was difficult for words to carry across the large playing spaces. In silent film, words could only appear on intertitles and over-reliance on these broke the flow of the film and negatively affected its pace. Thus, in early silent comedies such as the shorts of Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd, comedy derived from seeing the star performer engaged in a physical battle

with his environment or circumstance. For example, in Keaton's 1920 short *One Week* (dir. Edward F. Cline and Buster Keaton), he and his new wife try to build their own home from a kit, resulting in Keaton falling from the first floor, panels of the house swinging around a pivot point, and him being squashed beneath a piano as it is delivered. None of these events requires an intertitle, as his incompetence is plain to see. Keaton's physical skill, honed by his upbringing as a vaudeville performer, allows him to perform the fall without appearing to be hurt, which allows the audience to laugh, safe in the knowledge that they would never be so foolish to sit on the end of a beam that they were in the process of sawing off.

There were, of course, some modes of performance in the first half of the twentieth century that did make use of language to create comedy, such as plays and some music hall patter acts, but most forms still relied heavily on comedy that took as its source the bodies of the performer(s). Even music hall stages were populated by some comic performers, working alone or in small groups, who relied on what the audience saw rather than what they heard as their main mode of working. For example, the music hall trio of Low, Hite, and Stanley, who performed together from the mid-1930s until 1961, centered on the height differences between the men. Stanley Ross was three feet tall, Roland Low was five foot six, and Henry Hite was seven foot six. One of their routines, with all three men in tuxedos and carrying a rifle, was a comic dance that relied on extracting comedy from the three very different men performing the same steps. Several times Ross falls and disrupts the routine. Hite towers over him in remonstrance and Ross's only available riposte is to bite him on the knee. Sight gags like this highlight the importance of their physical presence to the act in which hardly any words are spoken. The climax of the act also relies on their varying heights. The three of them come to a stop facing the wings. Ross bends at the waist and exits by walking backwards through the arches made by the legs of Low and Hite. Low then bends in the same way and exits through the legs of Hite who bends and backs off stage. In 1966, another trio would use height differences to reinforce class difference in British television's "Class" sketch performed by John Cleese, Ronnie Barker, and Ronnie Corbett on *The Frost Report*. Here, difference in height is used satirically to convey a minimal script about class.

A consideration of skill and technique will remain a constant as this chapter examines the variety of strategies used to create physical comedy. The most obvious technique used by performers of physical comedy is that of distortion and exaggeration. These elements enable the performer to establish the character and the events that affect him or her in such a way as to reinforce for the viewer that these are circumstances which do not belong in the world the audience inhabits. Exaggeration and distortion can take many forms. For example, Keaton's trademark deadpan expression is a simple type of distortion.



FIGURE 5.1: Buster Keaton, *The Navigator*, 1924. PictureLux / The Hollywood Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.

Given the events he withstands, the viewer might reasonably expect to see him wince or grimace. The stillness of his face contrasts with and thereby heightens the ridiculousness of his physical actions. Keaton's autobiography recounts him making this discovery whilst still quite young. "I learned at an awful early age that when I laughed the audience didn't" (cited in Sweeney 2007: ix).

This mode of expression was heightened by the development of the cinematic close-up.

Other physical performers also discovered that having a particularly expressive face worked well for them. Michael Crawford endowed his character Frank Spencer with a trademark facial expression (one finger to the corner of his mouth whilst widening his eyes), which allowed him to indicate to the audience that he realized he had mis-stepped, inviting them to laugh at him. Such facial expressions allow the performers to acknowledge or disavow the part they have played in their own situation. However, for Keaton's cinematic character and for Crawford's televisual Frank Spencer, the expressions work differently. Keaton's deadpan suggests that there was nothing he could have done to avoid what has happened to him, rendering him a victim of the elements, his environment, or the mischief of other characters. On the other hand, Crawford's expression reveals that he has been the main cause of whatever accident has befallen him because of his own incompetence and ineptitude.

Philosopher Simon Critchley suggests that "the body that is the object and subject of humour is an *object* body—estranged, alien, weakening, failing" (2002: 51). This particular kind of abjection relates directly to the most significant type of body considered in this chapter: the incompetent body. The incompetent body may be employed to convey physical incompetence such as the protagonist's inability to stay on his or her feet. In these cases, incompetence is *performed* by bodies that are far from incompetent. Indeed, there is a central paradox in physical comedy and slapstick in that the performer's body must be extremely skilled in order to convince the audience of the character's very incompetence. Additionally, incompetence can refer to a character's social ineptitude, their inability to behave in the way demanded by the social situation in which they find themselves. The skill of the performer's body is here not employed in elaborate stunts but instead to create the physicality of characters who look and behave in socially incompetent ways. Jerry Lewis was a master at creating such characters, for example the title role in the film *The Nutty Professor* (dir. Jerry Lewis 1963). In fact, his creation of such characters overlaps with another significant and wide-ranging category: the exaggerated body. Exaggeration may be used to highlight a range of physical features including social awkwardness (as in *The Nutty Professor*), age (see the discussion of Julie Walters below), and size (as discussed above). It can also refer to the isolation and exaggeration of body parts such as occurs in John Cleese's performance in Monty Python's "Ministry of Silly Walks" sketch, in which the exaggeration is focused on his legs whilst his torso and his face are relatively neutral, contributing to the comedy by providing a contrast to the ridiculousness of what is happening in the lower half of his body.

Whilst elements of exaggeration can be found in the use of the human body to create odd and distorted shapes, it can also be used in the representation of

pain and violence for comic effect. Physical comedy is a comedy of excess and exaggeration in which bodies behave unusually and withstand physical punishment or demonstrate physical skill beyond the capabilities of the majority of the audience. One kind of physical extremity is to inflict pain on the human body. If this is done with a secure enough comic frame (see my *Slapstick and Comic Performance* for a fuller consideration of this framework), then the audience is freed to laugh through a combination of exaggeration and a lack of realism, particularly in relation to the consequence of such pain.

An example of this lack of realism, if not a lack of consequence, can be seen in the 2007 film *Hot Fuzz* (dir. Edgar Wright). In this film, a series of individuals meet gruesome deaths at the hands of an unknown murderer. The first of these deaths occurs when two individuals are supposedly decapitated in a road traffic collision. The sequence in the film shows their heads on the tarmac, their faces frozen into unrealistic grimaces of pain and terror. These heads are clearly wax models of the actors and their lack of realism contributes to the humor of the moment. This sequence of visually grotesque comedy is cued in the film by verbal comedy. The police officer is woken by a phone call to call him to the scene. Answering the call, he repeats a single word, “decaffeinated,” clearly a play on decapitated. A later shot shows the convertible car with a trail of blood running from each seat across the back of the car. The second death occurs when a large house explodes with the owner inside. Here one might expect not to see the body given that a long shot shows us the house has been completely destroyed. Once again, the dead body is shown, gruesomely burned. Each of these incidents focuses on the dead remains, which exist as a consequence of acts of violence; the remains are gruesomely depicted so that, whilst some revulsion may be felt, the comic frame is reinforced by the complete lack of realism.

Each murder is preceded by shots of a hooded figure in full-length black robes. In the third murder, this figure is shown dislodging a piece of stonework from the church while a local reporter waits beneath. Eventually the piece of stonework (which is pyramid-shaped) falls and lands point down on the reporter’s head. We then see a shot of him standing with the pyramid point down into his neck and his head has disappeared. An enormous amount of blood spurts toward the horrified police officer played by Simon Pegg. Clearly, in reality the dead man should have fallen to the floor but in the film he manages a step forward, still spurting blood, before falling to his knees. He then falls forward onto his stomach and as he hits the ground there is a final spurt of blood.

The generous use of stage blood combined with the unrealistic physical response to the impact highlights the disconnect between cause and effect and it is in the space created by this disconnect that the laughter can occur. That this is the third murder shown also reinforces the ridiculousness of the situation

that in a sleepy English village where everybody knows everybody, a hooded murderer is able to strike repeatedly. The fourth murder involves a florist being stabbed with a pair of gardening shears. We witness the attack by the hooded figure through the shop window to which Pegg has his back, a similarity to the pantomime staple of, "He's behind you!" Again, the physical reaction is unrealistic. Even though she has been stabbed in the throat with a pair of gardening shears, the character manages to turn so that blood showers the window of her shop. When the camera cuts back to her, she is holding onto the shears and her mouth is open in an exaggerated scream. In each of these scenes, the violence and the effects of that violence are exaggerated to such an extreme that this exaggeration in combination with the strong frame established by the film allows the audience to laugh even as they are shocked.

Another form of exaggeration used to create visual and physical comedy occurs in the presentation of elderly characters. Whilst there are examples, such as Nan from *The Catherine Tate Show*, in which the comedy derives from the combination of words and grotesque make-up rather than physical mishap or incompetence, in the hands of other writers and actors the elderly character provides an excellent opportunity for physical and visual comedy. Julie Walters demonstrates a comic genius in the creation of a series of grotesquely exaggerated elderly women: the waitress, Mrs. Overall, and Petula Gordinio, scripted for her by Victoria Wood.¹ In each of these characters, a series of exaggerations are created through Walters' physicality and through the use of costume and make-up.

These exaggerations serve to create situations that might be heart-breaking were they real. Consider the elderly waitress played by Julie Walters in the sketch "Two Soups," from the second series of *Victoria Wood As Seen on TV*. In this sketch, Walters' character is hearing impaired, shakes, and moves very slowly. She encounters great difficulty in taking her customers' orders, repeatedly making the long, slow walk back to the kitchen to check information that she has forgotten. Each of these walks provides Walters with an opportunity to demonstrate the character's infirmity and to demonstrate the precision of her physical creation of age. As she walks, she crosses each foot in front of the other. Her arms hang limp at her sides and her upper body is hunched forward. Her head shakes constantly from side to side. She cannot raise her arms level enough when carrying the soup and, as a result, by the time she gets the two bowls of soup to her customer, there is no soup left in them. She has shaken the contents onto the floor and is oblivious to her own failure. Here the audience is encouraged to laugh (through exaggeration and repetition) at abject failure. Here we also see the writer's skill in structuring the scene. Without the eight lengthy entrances Wood has written, Walters would not have the time to build the character. Each entrance and long return walk provides the audience with the opportunity to experience, almost viscerally, the development of the physicality and to gradually anticipate the likely consequences, thereby

increasing the comedy of the visual punchline when it arrives. Here the comedy derives from exaggerating the inevitable weakening of the human body but produces empathy rather than ridicule.

In physical comedy, it is not only the old who lose control of themselves. The film *Bridesmaids* (dir. Paul Feig 2011) provides an example of extreme loss of control caused by food-poisoning in a group of young women. In the film, the women are at a high-end bridal outfitters, having had lunch at a Brazilian steakhouse restaurant. One by one, dressed in fine gowns, they succumb to the symptoms of food poisoning. Whilst some of the humor in the scene is created by verbal comments, the strongest moments of comedy are created through a combination of close-up shots on the sweating faces of the women and an increasing number of magnified sounds of belching and passing wind. The scene escalates as two of the women rush for the bathroom. The first woman into the bathroom vomits with such force that the sick spatters the toilet before she can lift the lid. As she proceeds to vomit into the toilet bowl, Megan (played by Melissa McCarthy) climbs onto the hand basin to use it as a toilet. An overhead shot establishes the physical positions of the women. This example uses gross-out humor to create comedy and the basic bodily functions are made to seem worse because of the high-class environment, the exaggeration of their symptoms, and because such behavior is not conventionally associated with women. The climax of the scene occurs when the bride runs out into the street in search of a bathroom. She is caught short part way across the road and her body contorts as she tries to prevent her bowels from emptying. Her knees buckle and her eyes widen before she says, "It happened." Clearly, the main conveyor of comedy here is her physical actions and facial expression and the audience's recognition of the fact that she has lost control of her bowels in the middle of a busy street whilst wearing an elaborate and highly expensive wedding dress. Physical comedy that focusses so insistently on defecation and vomiting (particularly when performed by women) is a relatively new development and demonstrates a form of abjection the characters are shamed by.

In this as in other filmed comedies, the response of the body to external forces can be intensified and choreographed by the editor's ability to focus upon and provide a rhythmic structure to the action portrayed. The importance of the original liveness of the body even if we view it in a mediatized form cannot be underestimated.

Whereas real or contrived displays of skill can be sources of physical comedy, in contrast the performer's inability to deal with their environment can also display physical skill and produce comedy. In an episode of *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* (1957–60) which aired in February 1959, Lucy, Desi, and their close friends Ethel and Fred Mertz are forced to share a hotel room.² Extra beds are brought into the room and Lucy is to sleep in a hammock. In a sequence which lasts nearly three minutes, Lucy repeatedly tries to get into the hammock

and fails. Whilst the other characters occasionally comment on Lucy's difficulties, the main source of humor is Lucy's physical struggle. In this sequence, Lucy falls from the hammock five times. The first three falls come as a tight sequence in which Lucy tries to climb in and fails. The first fall occurs when she sits on the hammock, then tries to raise her legs to lie down and the hammock flips over so that she upturns with it and falls to the floor. The fall is clearly controlled by Ball but the speed of the performance makes this difficult to discern. This is a useful example of how the performer's skill establishes the character's incompetence. The second fall is an almost exact repeat of the first, whilst the third offers some variation.

Patterns of repetition and variation in physical action help to provide a structure to physical gags. They also help to increase the audience's sense of anticipation. Once the first fall has happened, the audience anticipates another fall each time Ball approaches the hammock. After a slight break in which verbal jokes are made, Ball is settled in the hammock. There is a knock at the door and the host enters through the door that Ball's hammock is attached to, causing her to fall once again. When she gets up, Ball moves the hammock to the other door providing the opportunity for another example of repetition and variation. Another knock is heard, Lucy looks toward the door that opened last time, calls out, "Come in," and the door she is supported by opens throwing her to the floor yet again. Throughout the entire sequence Ball speaks very little, instead the comedy conveyed through the movement of her body and through close-up shots of her facial expressions. These expressions, unlike the deadpan expression for which Keaton was famous, show us how bewildered Lucy is by the difficulties the world presents. She never acknowledges that there may be any incompetence on her part. Instead, she generates a robust determination in the face of whatever the world throws at her.

The notion of creating comedy through tripping, falling, and dropping things is common in circus clowning. The clown's skills are, of course, exhibited without the aid of cinematic technology. An example of theatrical clowning that reveals extensively the performers' skill in contrast to the characters' incompetence can be found in a sketch performed by Norman Wisdom and Bruce Forsyth in 1961 and recorded for a television show called *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*.³ The "Wallpaper" sketch exemplifies exaggeration and excess, chaos and anarchy, performance skill and the two performers working in the tradition of a double act.

The premise of the sketch is that the two must hang some wallpaper. Sketches such as these, which revolve around decorating, can be found in many forms of popular entertainment including the circus (see the Ringling Bros Circus 143rd edition; Chaplin's 1915 short *Work*; pantomime and Mr. Bean's explosive technique for painting his room). The set and props indicate the action to take place and the sketch lasts for 7 minutes and 35 seconds without a word being

spoken. The nature of their double act is established in their contrasting entrances. Forsyth strolls on entirely unencumbered. Wisdom follows carrying two trestles, planks, and a chair (hanging around his neck). It is immediately clear that Forsyth is in charge and that Wisdom is to be his minion, an idea reinforced when Wisdom places the chair so that Forsyth can sit. Forsyth goes to sit, hesitates, drags a finger across the seat of the chair, looks at his finger, looks at Wisdom, and then looks away while Wisdom takes off his hat and uses it to clean the chair. The status difference between the two is clear and will be reinforced as the sketch continues. Forsyth then sits and watches as Wisdom tries to erect the trestles and lay the planks across the top to create a work surface.

What follows is a wonderful example of performed incompetence: Wisdom places the trestles too far apart and then struggles to balance the plank because if he places it on one trestle, it will not reach the other. He looks out to the audience to emphasize the difficulty that he is having. A look also indicates that he thinks he has found a solution: he turns the plank over as if it may be longer that way up. His disappointment and confusion are supported by physical adjustments to his body: in particular as he turns to the side he steps almost on tip toes, which is an unusual way of walking. The sequence so far is a model both of simplicity and attention to detail. When no words are spoken, the entire attention of the audience is necessarily focussed on the bodies of the performers so that any looks or minor adjustments become extremely important. Forsyth stands and moves one trestle closer to the other and Wisdom is able to place the plank successfully. However, positioning the plank is actually the setup for the next section of the physical gag. Having positioned one plank, he turns upstage and picks up the other. He steps backwards and places it on the trestles so that, facing upstage, he is trapped between the two. There is a roar of laughter from the studio audience but Wisdom does not perceive his difficulty until he turns back downstage and realizes that he has one plank in front of him and one behind, meaning that he cannot move.

The next sequence of incompetence involves him trying to work out how to free himself. Once again, up on his toes, he steps in each direction, establishing that he is fully trapped. Forsyth stands to help him, lifting the downstage plank as Wisdom lifts the upstage one. An elaborately choreographed sequence of moves follows. Their first attempt results in Wisdom still being trapped, as does the second. On the third attempt Forsyth is trapped and on the fourth attempt they are both trapped. Such a use of repetition and variation is common in structuring a visual or physical gag. The repetition allows the audience to anticipate likely outcomes and this anticipation can then be fulfilled or subverted. Whilst the lifting of the planks and the swinging them around to reposition them remains relatively constant, Wisdom and Forsyth change the pace so that between trapping Forsyth alone and trapping the two of them

together they repeat their earlier steps but at a run. This variation of pace encourages the audience to remain focussed and the nature of the moves also establishes the skill of the performers in timing the positioning of the planks correctly. After some further business adjusting the planks, Wisdom is sent to measure the width of the wall to be wallpapered. He climbs the ladder and stretches out his arms to take the measurement. He wobbles wildly in this position giving the suggestion that he might fall, causing laughter and some shrieking from the live audience. He steps down the ladder and as he turns he moves his arms so that instead of being stretched out they are only a foot or so apart. This is a clear visual indication of his incompetence, as he shows no awareness that this distance is patently incorrect. The error is also not acknowledged by Forsyth who cuts the roll of paper to match the smaller distance. Only when Wisdom holds it up does he see the problem. In the scrabble for a new roll of paper Wisdom and Forsyth end up in each other's arms and Wisdom whirls them around in a dance, supported by a change in the music which has been playing throughout the scene.

The audience can anticipate, even before the sequence begins, some of the problems that the performers may encounter. The element of surprise, which increases the audience's enjoyment, comes from the precise way the performers generate difficulties and their attempts to resolve them. The audience is also entertained by the skill of these two consummate performers with their well-established characters.

The costumes worn by Forsyth and Wisdom in the performance analyzed above are relatively realistic (although Wisdom's jacket and trousers are characteristically too small for him) but, in many examples of physical humor, costume and make-up are used to distort the performer's body or to render it in some way "other." This, of course, has been evident in comic characterization throughout history. In some way, the body is made to look different from those we see around us in everyday life, and it can be most readily indicated through costume. Think of Chaplin's ill-fitting costume: each of the items demonstrates his attempt to look like a well-presented gentleman. He wears a hat, a jacket, trousers, a shirt and tie, and carries a cane. However, the costume is made odd by the fact that none of the items fits him particularly well, each being either too big or too small. Even the cane is used unusually, as Chaplin spends more time twirling it than leaning on it. These costumed bodies also behave differently to our own and those we are used to seeing in daily life.

Another way these bodies may be marked as "other" is through the use of cross-dressing. Most often in comedy, this occurs when male bodies are costumed and presented as female but occasionally the reverse is also true. Very often the nature of the body's "othering" is generated by the writer, in the service of the narrative, because the way costume contributes to the establishment of a disguise or allows for mistaken identity contributes significantly toward the



FIGURE 5.2: Mrs. Doubtfire / Robin Williams. United Archives GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo.

plot. Nevertheless, in writer-generated examples that follow, bodies are cross-dressed, hidden, or undressed (and occasionally some combination of all three) to generate comedy, which, while it may be supported by words, resides predominantly in the body.

In the 1993 film *Mrs. Doubtfire* (dir. Chris Columbus), Robin Williams, as Daniel Hillard, disguises himself as a Scottish nanny in order to be close to his children and is often caught in poses that juxtapose his outward female appearance with masculine poses and movements. A number of moments from the film are worthy of exploration. First, there is comedy to be had from the process of transformation that allows us to see the steps by which Williams' body is transformed into that of an older woman. Hilliard turns to his brother, Frank, handily a professional make-up artist, to help disguise himself as a woman. They try several disguises, each of which plays on a stereotype of femininity. The first is an elaborately made-up, highly sexualized woman with long red nails and an appetite for sex. The next is a Yiddish mother with exaggerated nose and head scarf. This leads them to Barbra Streisand before they settle on Mrs. Doubtfire. However, the full costume is not revealed to the audience at this point. Instead, we are shown close-up shots of the elements that will form Mrs. Doubtfire, including the application of make-up to the face; a drawer containing teeth; the teeth being inserted; glasses being put on; pantyhose on hairy legs.

The last element of this sequence is a shot that pans up the back of Mrs. Doubtfire from feet to head. The frontal view is not revealed until we see Mrs. Doubtfire as the door is opened by Miranda Hillard, his ex-wife. The disguise is not, in and of itself, particularly comical, at least not as long as Mrs. Doubtfire is fully dressed. However, the consequences of Daniel Hillard being disguised are demonstrated when he arrives home as Mrs. Doubtfire, to find the social worker, Mrs. Selner, waiting to see his male self. The humor of the action that follows relies upon the constant threat of discovery as Daniel tries to convince the social worker that both he and his sister are present in the apartment. Importantly, the audience sees the moments of transformation.

The first undressing of Mrs. Doubtfire allows the audience to see what lies below the surface of Mrs. Doubtfire as the body padding is revealed. In these moments, we see the outline of the female body but hear Daniel speaking to Mrs. Selner in a male voice. Much of the comedy of this sequence therefore lies in the juxtaposition of male and female both aurally and visually. The wording of the lines directs attention back to the bodily transformation we are witnessing. As Daniel undresses he says, "I've been through some really interesting changes recently" and then, as he removes his bra, "I want to keep you abreast of some of the changes in my career." The audience's attention is directed to the body by these comments as we witness the emergence of Williams' (and therefore Daniel's) hairy and unquestionably male body whilst he is still wearing the mask and wig of Mrs. Doubtfire. Williams emerges as Daniel, only to discover that Mrs. Selner would like a cup of tea, which, because of the story he has created, only Mrs. Doubtfire can make. He changes back into the female body, witnessed by two boys in a neighboring house, whose presence reinforces for the audience of the film the bizarre situation in which Hillard has placed himself. In the course of the swift changes the Mrs. Doubtfire mask is knocked out of an open window and is run over by a refuse truck. Daniel shuts himself into the kitchen wearing the female body suit, the wig, and a dressing gown. He is searching desperately for something with which to conceal his face as Mrs. Selner approaches the kitchen. He opens the refrigerator and plunges his face into the icing on a cake thus concealing his identity with what he claims is a meringue face mask. The whole sequence generates comedy through the visual appearance of his body rapidly switching from male to female and through the threat of his discovery.

The common use of cross-dressing in comedy (*Tootsie*, dir. Sydney Pollack 1982; *Big Momma's House*, dir. Raja Gosnell 2000; and *White Chicks*, dir. Keenen Ivory Wayans 2004 on film; the Monty Python Team 1969–74 and Melissa McCarthy as Shaun Spicer on *Saturday Night Live* 2017 on television) has rendered it a common trope of physical comedy. Whilst *Mrs. Doubtfire* has provided a clear example of comic cross-dressing, the mask and costume still constitute a disguise and part of the humor arises in moments of transition or

moments in which the disguise is almost revealed, such as when her teeth begin to fall out at the dinner table.

Other examples focus on the use of cross-dressing as a way to generate comedy in and of itself rather than as a form of disguise within the narrative. Cross-dressing characters in the theater can be traced back as far as the Greeks but in the period under consideration here, its main theatrical use can be found in farce and in British pantomime dames. It is also a common trope in televised sketch shows, which will be considered below. The resolutely popular appeal of both these theatrical forms suggests that cross-dressing (at least in these contexts) is acceptable to audiences and can be a source of comedy. Here the comedy lies in the *mixing* of messages. In pantomime, the purpose of cross-dressing is never to pass one gender off as the other convincingly. Instead, the audience is presented with extreme caricature. This relies on the dame's belief that she looks attractive whilst the audience can readily understand that her make-up is too exaggerated, her clothes are outrageous, and the shape of her body is exaggerated in the bust, stomach, and bottom. Many pantomimes include a routine in which the pantomime dame does a strip tease. The nature of this is highly comical as the audience watches the layers of garish and exaggerated female clothing and underwear being removed, knowing that the act will stop before nudity because enough clothing has to remain on to remind us that we are not supposed to read this body as male. This collision of gender signifiers allows the performer to be cheekier in terms of such physical actions as adjusting their bust or showing their knickers.

The Monty Python team created four series of the sketch show *Monty Python's Flying Circus* between 1969 and 1974. While the Python team did make occasional use of female performers for some female roles, they also made extensive use of deliberately unconvincing cross-dressing. They wore female outfits, usually including hats or headscarves and often carried handbags but made no attempt to remove or conceal their beards so audiences were presented with a confusion of signs, indicating both male and female. The male performers put on comically female voices, excessively high pitched, sometimes playing on them "forgetting" and speaking briefly in male voices. In *Life of Brian* (dir. Terry Jones 1979), Jones performs in drag throughout the film as Brian's mother. Though he wears a dress and headdress he does not look or sound particularly feminine. When Brian and his mother attend a stoning his mother has to pretend to be male, as women cannot attend stonings. At the stoning, it is clear that most of those in attendance are women characters (many of whom are played by male actors) pretending to be men. The pretense takes the form of evidently false beards and speaking in gruff voices. These gruff voices are forgotten each time the women get excited, provoking Cleese's character to ask, "Are there any women here today?" As is usual with Python, cross-dressing is used to reinforce the absurdity of the situation.

The television comedy *Little Britain* makes use of predominantly unconvincing drag with David Walliams as Emily Howard and Matt Lucas as Bubbles DeVere. In each of these examples, the audience is not intended to believe that either performer is female. The comedy derives from the incongruity between their behavior as women and the way that they look. As Emily Howard, David Walliams wears a dress, make-up, and wig but does not use any body padding to create a convincing feminine shape and he repeatedly asserts that he is a “laydee.” Two sketches from *Little Britain USA* highlight the incongruity between what Emily Howard claims and what she actually is. In one sketch, Howard has been hired as a live model for an art class. She undresses behind a screen so that the audience does not see the transformation from “female” to male, but the drawing shown on camera clearly depicts both her wig and a masculine body and penis. The Emily Howard character is mild compared to Lucas’s creation, Bubbles DeVere. DeVere is a more grotesque character. According to Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body, “The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation” ([1965] 1984: 26). Whilst we do not see DeVere in childbirth, the body created on top of Lucas’ own is excessive in terms of size and anarchic in terms of behavior. As often as not DeVere is seen naked or topless and she is relentless in her pursuit of sexual partners. The responses of these putative partners reinforce the audience’s likely reaction to Bubbles—that she is too much. The audience knows of the male body beneath the female mask, but Lucas’ masculinity is never revealed as Walliams’ is and here the comedy derives from Bubbles’ flaunting of her excessive body. In one sketch from *Little Britain Abroad Part 1* (2006), Bubbles visits a high-class dress shop to try to borrow a dress. At the beginning of the sketch Bubbles is fully dressed in a white and gold tracksuit which highlights the size of her breasts, stomach, and bottom. When she selects a small-sized dress to try on, the audience can anticipate either that the dress will split or that she will look ridiculous. In fact, both of these occur. When Bubbles comes out of the dressing room with the words, “What do you think?,” she has stretched the dress over the top half of her body, leaving her lower half exposed. She is wearing only a thong and when she turns, her excessively sized buttocks are fully exposed. The dress is not large enough to contain her bust and her right breast has forced a split in the fabric and is hanging in full view. The visual impact of this excessive cross-dressed body is extreme. The quality of the body mask is so good that it is impossible to discern where Lucas’ body finishes and Bubbles’ begins. Comedy also arises from Bubbles’ belief that such an outfit may both fit and suit her and her lack of embarrassment in revealing the way in which the dress covers her. The sequence is rendered funnier by the cross-dressing because, despite its convincing appearance, the audience always knows that the breast and buttocks revealed

are fictional and this creates a comic distance, which allows an audience to be potentially disgusted and amused at the same time.

Bodies in states of undress or dressed as the opposite gender (comedy still tends to work in these binary traditions) can be presented as sites of humor for a variety of reasons. Each of these states appears as temporary, in some way liminoid, and therefore presents a situation in which actions that fall outside of our usual codes of behavior may occur. Both states also speak to common anxieties. We are afraid to be caught in a state of undress and, traditionally, we like to be sure of the gender of anyone we meet. Equally both states are anarchic and suggest the possibilities of liberties that we might be afraid to take.

In *What the Butler Saw* ([1969] 2010), Joe Orton pushes the anarchy of undressed bodies to the extreme, presenting Geraldine Barclay, Nick Beckett, and Sergeant Match in varying stages of undress. He also plays with the presentation of gender by having Nick and Geraldine swapping outfits in their attempts to remain covered, prompting the Sergeant to say, “This is a boy, sir, not a girl. If you’re baffled by the difference . . . it might be as well to approach both with caution.” This line addresses the potential anxiety related to misinterpreting the gender of those we meet, but Prentice’s confusion is understandable given the rapidity with which Orton has the characters exiting and entering.

In less dark farces, scantily clad bodies appear when illicit sexual liaisons are taking place. This results in partially clad actors hiding in wardrobes, behind curtains, or under beds. In these instances, the body is rendered funny by its absence rather than through its presence, but it is vital that the audience is aware of the hidden body. For example, in Richard Bean’s political farce *In the Club* (performed 2007 and published 2009), hidden bodies are repeatedly used to provoke laughter. In Act One, Andre from the Fraud Investigation Office hides in closet in a hotel suite occupied by MEP Phillip Wardrobe. He has bugged the room and conceals himself in the closet to listen to the conversations taking place in the room. Sasha, Wardrobe’s assistant, knows that he is there and tries to signal to Wardrobe to prevent him from incriminating himself. Whilst he lists the false claims he makes for expenses, the stage directions indicate that she is “mouthing no and saying shhh.” Her desperate attempts to shut him up may be funny in themselves but the comedy is increased by the audience’s foreknowledge that Andre is listening in. When he finally emerges, he does so disguised as the new MEP from Malta. He is now in plain sight but his true identity is concealed, a fact of which the audience and Sasha are aware but of which Wardrobe has no understanding. Contemporary farce remains one of the few locations of live physical comedy in the theater today, in opposition to a diminution of the importance of physical comedy in other forms of theater and in other media.

CONCLUSION

In considering the body in the comedy of this period, the centrality of slapstick is very clear, particularly in the early years of the period. Physical extremity remains remarkably consistent from 1920 to the present day—the human body is after all the human body. However, what might be considered extreme in terms of social behavior has changed considerably, as has been demonstrated in the examples explored here. The presentation of incompetence as a source of physical comedy is another constant. It exists in early examples of vaudeville, in early silent comedy, and is still present in recent film and television, as is seen in Rowan Atkinson's Mr. Bean character.

The use of physical extremity and comic pain and violence has developed during the period covered by this volume. Silent film comedies rely on relatively realistic depictions of falls and blows but the development of parodies and combinations of genres, particularly from the 1980s onwards, has introduced more extreme versions of comic violence. This was explored above in relation to *Hot Fuzz* but can also be seen in horror parodies such as the *Scary Movie* franchise or in the comedy of Monty Python's *The Holy Grail* (dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones 1975) in which the Black Knight loses all his limbs, spurting blood wildly but will not give up the fight.

The period since the turn of the millennium appears to have seen some turning away from physical comedy unless it is connected to gross-out humor, as in *Bridesmaids*. The alternative to this is comic violence occurring within the frame of action films like the Marvel Avengers series (2008), *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (dir. Matthew Vaughn 2015), or *Deadpool* (dir. Tim Miller 2016). This is part of a trend in which both film and television comedy is increasingly verbal and social, reducing the importance of the body except in so far as it signifies a character's social inadequacy by not looking right, dressing right, or behaving in the expected way. Time will tell whether this is the beginning of the end for physical comedy or whether this is a passing shift in focus from which the body will return as a prime source of comedy.

CHAPTER SIX

Politics and Power

CHRIS VOGNAR

On a surface level, power is not particularly funny. It is actually kind of scary. It spawns mongering, hunger, and abuse. It corrupts (absolutely, in some cases). It is something to be wielded, usually at the expense of others. Those who obsess over it and plot for it—say, Richard III—tend to be among the most loathsome of cultural villains.

Still, we find in power a reason to laugh, especially in those who grope for it, long for it, dream of it. Sometimes they even achieve it. Even in those instances, however, power's fruits remain elusive. That is when the fun starts. Something tickles us when the powerful are rendered powerless and become as aware as we are of their predicament. Power becomes an illusion, the thing strivers wear, head in the air, even as its potency wanes (if it was ever really there to begin with).

For all the many strains of political humor and satire, this state of powerless power seems to remain a constant. The humor lies in the discrepancy between what has been conferred and what actually exists, between the pride and puffery and the fact that even the most powerful are subject to forces beyond their control. They struggle gamely on, comically shrinking in our estimation, and often in their own. But they can rarely acknowledge that. That would mean relinquishing the illusion and pulling back the curtain, like Toto did to the Wizard of Oz.

Film is fertile ground for studying such dilemmas. You can hear the powerless power in the voice of President Merkin Muffley, the ineffectual US president played to perfection by Peter Sellers in *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (dir. Stanley Kubrick 1964). President Muffley faces the unenviable task of phoning the Soviet premier to inform him

that a US general has gone rogue (and insane) and launched a nuclear attack. The most powerful man in the free world, the president offers pleasantries, equivocates a bit, asks the premier to “turn the music down a little,” and tries to break the news:

What happened is, one of our base commanders, he kind of, sort of, went a little funny in the head. You know. A little . . . funny. He went and did a silly thing. He ordered his planes (long pause) to attack your country.

A comedy about nuclear Armageddon demands a deft touch, and *Dr. Strangelove* has that in abundance. Sellers plays up the president’s wishy-washy demeanor with a hesitant, somewhat nasal delivery and a not-quite-bald hairdo. He was said to have modeled President Muffley—the name suggests emasculation—on two-time presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson, a favorite of intellectuals and a frequent target of hawks. But it is the language that sells the absurdity of the moment. “Went a little funny.” “Did a silly thing.” You can see the power draining from Sellers’ face with each line, as the laughs get bigger and bigger. Facing down the gravest international threat possible, the president sounds like a kid trying to tell his mom how his baseball came to knock over her favorite vase. But he pushes on, because he has no choice. The burden of power remains, even when the powerful look ridiculous.

The current master of power-and-politics satire is Armando Iannucci, the Scottish-born writer-director who has brought his brand of dry chaos to movies and television. In Iannucci’s corridors of power, from Great Britain (*The Thick of It*, 2015–12 and *In the Loop*, 2009) to the USA (*Veep*, 2012–19), all anyone wants is to suck up to power. Even the most powerful characters remain, so to speak, out of the loop. The operative principles are miscommunication, ego (flexed and trampled upon), and humiliation. In the land of Iannucci, most potential victories turn into defeats, and everyone with power lives for cozying up to someone with a little more. Iannucci would have made for a fine naturalist novelist: nobody is really in control of anything in his work. In lieu of real power, his characters wield language, torrents of bon mots and profanity that give futile power seekers at least some kind of verbal leverage.

Swinging the sharpest axe in *The Thick of It* and the film it inspired, *In the Loop*, is the prime minister’s director of communications, Malcolm Tucker (played by Peter Capaldi). Malcolm is the puppet master, the alpha male who barges into meetings and unleashes strings of gut-busting profanity, such as one of his telephone sign-offs: “Fuckety-bye.” Malcolm is rather upset because the British Secretary of State for International Development, Simon Foster (Tom Hollander), has stumbled into a sea of press microphones and mumbled something about war being “unforeseeable.” This displeases Malcolm. Or, as he

snarls to Simon, “I will marshal all the forces of darkness to hound you to an assisted suicide.”

The irony of both *The Thick of It* and *In the Loop* is that nobody really has any power, and in this world of spin, crossed communication wires, and improvised damage control, nobody knows anything. The promotional poster for the movie features an illustration of a US official and a British official engaged in a game of telephone, with two tin cans and a string. The image gets at both the diminished power of supposed power players—reduced to playing a primitive children’s game—and the propensity for the truth, or at least accurate information, to get lost in the ether.

The war in question, which goes unspoken, is the Iraq War, which was spearheaded by US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. But Iannucci’s passions lie with the underlings, the middle management, those desperate to make a name for themselves and to have their names remembered by the truly important people (who, for the most part, never appear). These parameters make Simon the perfect, hopeless Iannucci hero. Even with his fancy title (Secretary of State for International Development), Simon walks through the film as a well-meaning, overmatched punching bag. After he attends an important meeting in Washington, DC, he is informed that he was not supposed to actually speak. He was just “meat in the room.” He is a little offended, but his deputy tries to reassure him: “You’re a prime cut. Not offal.”

Ultimately, we discover even Malcolm the alpha dog has less power than he would like. For all of his snarl, he is still doing the prime minister’s bidding, which in this case means kowtowing to the American war machine, represented by the Rumsfeldian US Assistant Secretary of State for Policy, Linton Barwick (David Rasche). In the showdown between the two, we sit slack-jawed as Malcolm is reduced to a state he is painfully unaccustomed to: silence. At least he gets to keep his job. Simon plans to resign in protest of the covert warmongering. Before he can, however, he gets fired for something completely unrelated to geopolitical matters: the wall that lines a constituent’s garden has crumbled after failed attempts to buttress it. Thus, *In the Loop* disproves an illusion Simon has voiced only minutes earlier: “I’m me. You’re not me. I get to decide all the main things about me.” Or not. Here again the comedy springs from the vast space between supposed power and lack of power. The Secretary of State for International Development is actually “meat in the room.” The big, bad swaggering Malcolm grows speechless in the face of an even bigger bully. In the world of *In the Loop*, to be powerful is to be powerless.

Iannucci used the acclaim garnered by *The Thick of It* and *In the Loop* to create an American comedy juggernaut. *Veep*, the HBO series that has vacuumed up twenty-eight Emmy awards since its 2012 debut, provides the perfect character to illustrate the illusion of power. The operative joke is firmly grounded in truth: it’s a thankless task to be vice president of the United States,

the only chance of glory or power contingent upon something horrible happening to the president.

Actually, at one point in the first season, it looks like that might just happen. Word arrives that the president is experiencing severe chest pains in the midst of an international trip. Vice President Selina Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) bursts into a smile when she hears the news, quickly wipes it off her face, and finds herself in the White House Situation Room for the official briefing and potential transfer of power. She is ready to work. But it turns out the president is fine, just some heartburn. Selina masks her disappointment, grudgingly hands the classified binders she has been cradling back to presidential aides, and trudges on. By the end of the episode she has caught a stomach bug, which does not stop her from the official business of posing for a photo opportunity at a local frozen yogurt shop. Just like that, she has gone from the brink of leading the free world to fighting back vomit for the cameras (or at least the bloggers who bothered to show up for the op). Her nominal power is a kind of cosmic joke, reinforced one stomach bug and photo op at a time.

In another early episode Selina walks into a former Senate colleague's office to wrangle a favor. "What have I been missing here?" asks the Veep. "Power," replies the senator. It's what Selina longs for; if she cannot have it, she at least wants to get close to it. "Did the president call?" she asks her personal secretary in every episode. "No," comes the answer, every time. So she reaches for other kinds of power, usually to comedic effect. When the official list of names for the next year's storms is released, she cringes when she sees that one bears her name. She cannot have a Hurricane Selina destroying cities, so she delegates an aide, Amy (Anna Chulmsky, an *In the Loop* veteran), to have the storm name changed. Amy says she'll see what she can do, but Selina's teen daughter (Sarah Sutherland) cannot get over her mom's attempted power trip: "You can't control the weather. You're not fucking Thor, mom."

In her defense, the Veep isn't the only one trying to turn a taste of power into a heaping helping. A typical episode plays like comedic Darwinism, with bosses, underlings, and everyone in between jockeying for some sort of supremacy. The long, lanky Jonah (Timothy Simons) actually works for the president, as he reminds Selina and her staff at every opportunity. They make a collective show of not caring, even as they rely on his trickle of information. Dan (Reid Scott), Selina's Deputy Director of Communications, is a desperate networker, in constant search of the next rung to climb. When the Veep's team visits an elementary school to promote Selina's Healthy Eating Initiative, Dan cozies up to a kid whose dad has an important job, prompting Amy to ask a legit question: "Are you networking with an eight-year-old?" Not even Sue (Sufe Bradshaw), Selina's steadfast, no-nonsense personal secretary, is immune to the power bug. She likes to say she is the third most important person in the world, by virtue of the fact that she is the gateway to Selina, who's the second most important person in the world.

Selina eventually captures the presidency, when the president resigns, then loses it, in an election that goes all the way to the House of Representatives. Recently, she has been working on her legacy, including the opening of her presidential library. But Iannucci was not around for that. He left *Veep* after Season Four, well before the madness of America's current real-world politics took hold. His film *The Death of Stalin* (2017) has fun with, well, the death of Stalin, imagining the panic and rush to fill the power vacuum created by the Russian dictator's passing. It plays kind of like *Veep*, but with gulags and executions.

Aside from that, it sounds like Iannucci has lost his appetite for political satire, at least for now. "Politics is ungraspable," he told the online film journal *Indiewire*: "It's now really about Facebook, virality, international trade. I think I'm done with Washington/London professional politicians. I'm more interested in looking at where real power is nowadays" (Kohn 2017). Selina, Malcolm, and the rest of Iannucci's creations could certainly relate to that.

Another subset of political comedy sets up plucky heroes to fail, flounder, and, against all odds, rise to represent high ideals and the glories of democracy. These comedies, which include *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (dir. Frank Capra 1939), *The Candidate* (dir. Michael Ritchie 1972), and *Head of State* (dir. Chris Rock 2003), all follow a similar pattern. Powerful, generally corrupt forces—wealthy media moguls, bad seed senators, crafty spin-doctors—conspire to put a naive patsy into higher office. At some point the patsy realizes he is a patsy and undergoes a crisis of faith in the political system. But these are comedies, not tragedies, which means the patsy musters his innate goodness and optimism to defeat the corrupt forces and provide a jolt of hope and renewal for the diseased body politic. They fight power after staking out a principled, privileged standing for themselves. They do battle with the system from within, by becoming a part of it. They have to earn their power and show that they deserve it, usually by surviving a gauntlet of power abuse and keeping their souls intact.

The prototype for these films is Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). The big, bad power broker is Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold, who also plays a big, bad power broker in Capra's *Meet John Doe*, 1941). His co-conspirators include Senator Joseph Paine (Claude Rains) and Governor Hopper (Guy Kibbee). They all hail from an unnamed western state, and they all stand to profit handsomely from the corruption-riddled construction of a new dam. Panic sets in when another senatorial conspirator dies suddenly, necessitating the selection of a pliable stooge to take his place. "He can't ask any questions or speak out of turn," Paine explains to his cronies. Desperate, the governor listens to his kids' endorsement. "I will not be attacked and belittled by my own children in my own home," he howls before doing just that. The children's choice? Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), who heads up a youth club called the Boy Rangers. Smith is a bona fide do-gooder, and his patrons figure they can bend him to their will without a sweat.

But it turns out they picked the wrong patsy. Smith, after all, is played by Stewart, exemplar of all-American virtue and wholesome determination. The junior senator is indeed in over his head. He gushes at the sight of the United States Capitol dome, assumes the press will tell the whole truth (never a good idea in a Capra film, in most of which the media is part of the problem), and fidgets nervously through his first days on the Senate floor. The town cynics, including Smith's aide Saunders (Jean Arthur) and the seen-it-all newspaper scribe Diz Moore (Thomas Mitchell), figure the kid is a lamb sent to slaughter. But they soon realize what the puppet masters fail to see: Smith wants to make a difference. And he wants to make it by raising money for a national boys' camp—on land already earmarked for the dam graft scheme.

These machinations are all prelude to the lengthy David vs. Goliath showdown that makes up the movie's climax. As Paine, who pretends to be a mentor to the young senator, and Taylor orchestrate a massive smear campaign, built upon the lie that Smith plans to reap profit from his boys' camp, Saunders instructs him in the fine art of the filibuster. Smith seizes the floor and proceeds to conduct a master class in folksy Capra corn, reading from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. At one point he unleashes a loud whistle, just to see if his colleagues are still awake. By the end he looks like a prizefighter, sweaty, unshaven, and wobbly. Eventually he collapses in exhaustion, at which point Paine, in a fit of conscience, makes a half-hearted suicide attempt and admits the truth: he, not Smith, is the corrupt politician. Paine has tried to turn Smith's seat of power into an illusion, much as it is in so much comedy of power. But Smith is too pure to let it happen. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* gives us comedy in which power can actually be used for good. Capra had little use for the irony so pungent in Iannucci's work.

Capra's comedies of politics and power, including *Mr. Smith*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), and *Meet John Doe*, generally end with the triumph of truth and human decency. But something always gets broken along the way. His stock in trade was simple, homespun individuals, usually played by Stewart (*Mr. Smith*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, 1946) or Gary Cooper (*Mr. Deeds*, *Meet John Doe*), nearly crushed by forces they could scarcely comprehend. These are not farces; they are modern morality tales that pit Capra's vision of the common man against the powers that be. Capra's heroes get badly bruised en route to their triumphs. His comedies, like Shakespeare's, usually have a tragic undercurrent right beneath the surface. Institutionalized power is the enemy, the leviathan that consumes everything in its path until it finally meets its tough but benevolent match.

Not all of the political patsy movies are driven by dark forces scheming in a backroom. Take *The Candidate*, Michael Ritchie's realpolitik study of an idealist who loses his true beliefs merely because that's what politics can make you do. Released in the midst of the 1972 Nixon/McGovern presidential campaign, *The*

Candidate started out as a pitch from actor-producer Robert Redford: "We want to make a movie about a liberal politician who sells out." The target of Redford's pitch, screenwriter Jeremy Lerner, suggested a slightly different approach. "Most of them don't sell out," he told Redford. "They get carried away. It's like being a movie star. The constant feedback buffets you like a man overboard in a turbulent river. You don't entirely trust it, but you have to respond to it if you want to keep going downstream. Know it or not, you may be heading over the falls" (Lerner 2000).

This description still applies nicely to Bill McKay, the green, reluctant California senate candidate who enters the race on the assumption that he cannot win against the seasoned, conservative incumbent Crocker Jarmon (Don Porter). McKay has good reason for his assumption. His campaign manager, Marvin Lucas, slides him a matchbook during their first meeting. On the back Lucas has written two words: "You lose." Or, as he tells McKay, "You don't have a chance, so say what you want." In other words, use the platform of a candidacy to push some progressive ideas out there and enjoy the comfort of knowing you don't have to compromise because you can't win anyway. Think Bernie Sanders' presidential run.

McKay proves to be a legitimate candidate, largely because he has the charm and looks of a young Robert Redford. He has the common touch out on the campaign trail. He seems honest. His handlers realize that he is rising in the polls, and they see that he does, in fact, have a chance. They start shaping his message and gently pushing him to equivocate for a mass audience. McKay's speeches and media appearances subsequently and gradually become more watered-down and generic, one bleeding into the next through a series of clever edits. He is packaged and sold like a box of cereal. "Our lives are more and more overwhelmed by forces that overwhelm the individual," he rails in a campaign speech. By this point he is starting to realize he might as well be describing his own course. He is heading over the falls.

The bitter punch line comes amid the McKay team's victory celebration. The champagne corks pop. The volunteers whoop. And McKay stares into space, looking paralyzed with fear. He gets Lucas alone for a moment before the victory press conference and asks the question he never thought he'd have to ask: "What do we do now?" What happens now that we actually have to govern? They are the last words of the film, and the finality of uncertainty lingers as the end credits roll. Here the idea of power, the potential to use it for good, is more appealing than the realities that come with it. McKay is left to wonder if his new, unexpected position of power will prove to be an illusion, another illustration of the comedy of futility.

The Candidate was a tough sell when it came out, a box-office failure and an object of scorn among political insiders. Eventually, however, reality caught up with it. As Lerner (2000) writes,

By the end of the '70s, the amalgamation of show biz and politics had become obvious, and *The Candidate* miraculously became readily accessible to the American audience and a standard play on pre-election television each year. By the '80s, the advertising "image-is-everything" environment was so dominant that I began to get a very different reaction from politicians. When I was in my 40s and met newly elected congressmen in their 30s, they were honored to meet me and would say, to my amazement, "That's us! That's the way we are!"

It seems not everyone caught the film's cautionary elements: in 1988, senator and vice-presidential candidate Dan Quayle claimed that he modeled himself after Bill McKay (Larner 2000).

If *The Candidate* was prophetic, so was *Head of State*. Here the patsy formula meets the politics of race. It's a comedy about a black presidential candidate, and it came out in 2003, a year before Barack Obama rose to prominence with his keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention, and a full five years before he ran for the highest office in the land. This Chris Rock vehicle fits the patsy formula and also tweaks it by adding some color to the equation. The humor is pretty tame, and as Roger Ebert (2003) put it, "We keep getting these movie fantasies where political candidates say what they think, are not afraid to offend, cut through the crap and take stands. Must be wish-fulfillment." Sure enough there is enough in *Head of State* to foreshadow better, similarly themed comedy that would arrive over the next few years, some of it provided by the president himself.

Rock plays Mays Gilliam, a Washington, DC alderman who works hard for his constituents. He even rescues one of them from a burning building just before it blows up. That bit of heroism lands Gilliam on TV, and onto the radar of political operatives from a party that doesn't go by the Democratic label but might as well. The presidential and vice-presidential candidates from said party have met a tragic end, their planes colliding over the state of Virginia with just nine weeks to go before the election. (*Head of State* is about as subtle as a swing state presidential campaign ad.) They need a charismatic candidate who has no chance of winning, because a veteran party hack (James Rebhorn) plans on running in four years. And so, they tab the black guy. As one party strategist says, "the minorities will be happy."

There are two basic jokes running throughout *Head of State*. One is that Gilliam has no pretenses, no experience, and no filter, and can therefore say anything he wants. "I'm from a neighborhood so bad you can get shot while you're getting shot," he tells the cameras. The other joke is that the hip black candidate will loosen up all the starchy white folks who rule the beltway. He takes over DJ duties at a fundraising party, where he spins Nelly's party anthem, "It's Getting Hot in Here," and introduces attendees to the urban dance-line

sensation known as the Electric Slide. He picks up endorsements from Wu-Tang Clan members Raekwon and Ghostface Killah. He takes a portrait of Ronald Reagan off the wall and replaces it with one of streetwise NBA star Allen Iverson, and trades in his three-piece suit for a velour Adidas track suit and a Kangol hat. He addresses the Players Ball, a convention for pimps, and promises to look out for “big business and small business, show business and ho business.” You can sense *Head of State* trying to break through its surface humor and try something genuinely subversive, but it does not seem to quite have the nerve, or the inclination to potentially alienate a mass audience.

Instead, the most pungent laughs are aimed at Gilliam’s opponent, a conservative blowhard named Brian Lewis (Nick Searcy). He is a safe target, representing establishment politics and spouting catch phrases prescient to the rise of Donald Trump, such as “God bless America. And no place else.” Among Lewis’ qualifications: he is Sharon Stone’s cousin, a connection which, in the show-biz circus of today’s politics, might actually garner him a few votes. In short, Lewis is the anti-Gilliam: practiced, slick, insincere, and, of course, white.

Gilliam selects his bail bondsman brother (the late Bernie Mac) to be his running mate, and together they ride their straight talk express into the White House. There’s no “What do we do now?” moment as *Head of State* wraps up; this isn’t a movie to make you ponder the existential dread of sacrificing your core values and your soul to the Mammon of big politics. Nor does *Head of State* ask us to contrast the genuine power Gilliam had as an alderman, a smaller scale job that nonetheless afforded him the opportunity to make a hands-on difference in the lives of his constituents. But there is an unintentionally funny line near the end, before Gilliam’s victory, as he considers quitting the race. He ends up staying in, for the sake of a larger purpose: “If I quit, there won’t be another black candidate for fifty years.” Back in the real world, of course, this would not be the case. The Obama era was right around the corner, as was a more biting, reality-based brand of political/racial humor. But first came a different flavor of politics, power, and comedy, courtesy of Dave Chappelle and his mischievous speculation on what the world might be like if George W. Bush were black.

Chappelle’s “President Black Bush” sketch, from season two of his Comedy Central series *Chappelle’s Show* (2003–6), is a different, braver animal than *Head of State*. For one, it names names. This is not a hypothetical fantasy about what it would be like to have a black president. It is a scabrous and profane take on a sitting president. The premise is deceptively simple: what might the planning, buildup, and execution of the Iraq War, the same subject as *In the Loop*, have looked and sounded like if President George W. Bush were black? What would the president’s justifications and rationale have been like without the necessary filter of standard political presentation and diplomacy? The sketch aired in 2004, on the cusp of Bush’s re-election; the events parodied

were fresh in viewers' minds. Black Bush takes the straight-talk element in *Head of State* and makes it brutally topical.

Played by Chappelle himself, Black Bush sees no need to beat around the bush in laying out the reasons why he wants the US to invade Iraq. Sitting before what appears to be a congressional committee, he pays lip service to regime change and geopolitical stability. Then he asks: "If I can be real about it? He tried to kill my father, man. I don't play that shit." He's referring to George H.W. Bush's bitter history with Iraq, which resulted in the first Iraq War, and reports that Iraq President Saddam Hussein tried to have Bush Sr. assassinated in 1993. A Black Bush aide, sitting next to the president, responds to his call in hip-hop parlance: "Say word, he tried to kill your father?" Black Bush grabs a boom mic and shouts his reiteration: "The man tried to kill my father!" Black Bush is giving voice to murmurs common at the time, that the second Iraq War was an all-in-the-family revenge job. Of course, George W. Bush could never say such a thing in public. But Black Bush can. As Bambi Higgins (2009) writes, "the premise of the sketch becomes facetiously educational: making it clear to nonwhites why they wouldn't trust the government either if it was being run by 'Black Bush.'"

Over the next few minutes, in a series of press conferences and briefings, Chappelle as Black Bush takes us through some of the basic events and issues surrounding the war. First, he addresses the widely held belief that Hussein was stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. "Not on my watch," Black Bush admonishes. "That's not how I roll. This shit is serious." In case you don't believe him, he's brought along a friend: British Prime Minister Tony Blair, played by black actor/comedian Jamie Foxx. Wearing a smoking jacket and affecting an exaggerated English accent, Black Blair profanely but politely backs up Black Bush's findings. Next up is a press conference in which Black Bush presents the "evidence" for WMDs. "He bought yellowcake," exclaims Black Bush, referring to the uranium Iraq was reportedly accumulating for said WMDs. As proof, Black Bush brings out his CIA director, played by the rapper/actor Mos Def. He wears aviator glasses, a skullcap, and a fur-fringed parka. In his hand he holds a piece of yellow cake—the kind to which you apply frosting. "Pray to God, don't drop that shit," warns another aide, identified onscreen as Some Black Dude. The joke here appears to be on the public's gullibility: the rationale for going to war has all the legitimate gravity of a helping of dessert.

The show continues. At another press conference a reporter asks Black Bush if the US is invading Iraq to protect its oil interests. "Oil?" asks Black Bush indignantly. "What? Huh? Who said anything about oil? You cooking?" (meaning, essentially, are you on meth?). Black Bush then spills a pitcher of water and runs from the room. At the next press conference a reporter brings up the lack of UN support for the war. Black Bush turns belligerent, addressing the UN directly: "You got a problem? You should sanction me with your army.

What? You don't have an army? I guess that means you need to shut the fuck up." He pumps up his Coalition of the Willing, reaching for references to hip-hop outfits Outkast ("Stankonia said they were willing to drop bombs over Baghdad") and Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force (which would actually make a nifty name for a military organization). And he gets angry again when a reporter asks about hopes for a general election in Iraq. "Damn, I knew I shouldn't have called on you. You're always trying to distract people with the war and skirt all the real issues." Such as? "Gay people are getting married, folks. Nasty!"

Black Bush dodges and equivocates, attacks and gets hyper-defensive, and changes the subject when he doesn't like it. Here Chappelle imagines blackness as a source of empowerment, a license to, as Chappelle puts it in another of his trademark skits, keep it real even as he lies through his teeth.

Black Bush seems to have skipped the Obama era entirely and predicted Donald Trump (to whom we will return shortly). Stephen A. Crockett, a senior editor at *The Root* (which covers black news, opinions, politics, and culture), explained as much in a 2017 article. With side-by-side comparisons of Black Bush and Trump, from belittling the UN to laying into the press and choosing his own version of reality. "I'm not sure if it's the braggart's behavior, his insistence on spouting non-facts as undeniable truths or the inherent humor behind his frightening inability to form a complete thought," Crockett writes, "but Trump is studied in the Black Bush approach toward governing, and it's only sad to us because this skit has the potential to last four long years" (Crockett 2017).

There's clearly some irony here. Chappelle's conception of a shoot-from-the-hip black president provokes logical comparisons to President Trump, who makes dog whistle appeals to a white-supremacist base and doesn't seem to have much use for people of color. By imagining a conservative president unencumbered by niceties of decorum or image, Chappelle was looking twelve years into the future at a populist race-baiter. Trump earned this reputation before he even ran for president, largely through his attacks on the first real-life black president.

Barack Obama, of course, was no Black Bush. In reality, being a black president does not mean saying whatever you want. It means swallowing your anger and remaining calm—and taking pains to not come across as the age-old stereotype of an angry black man. It is this challenge that lies at the heart of the Obama's era's most pungent piece of political humor. Perhaps the best part? The president was in on the joke.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote at the start of 2017, "the improbability of a black president had once been so strong that its most vivid representations were comedic." Then the improbable became reality in 2008, when Obama made history by defeating Arizona Senator John McCain in the presidential election.

Backlash was swift. Coates, in describing whiteness as a badge of sorts, put it this way: “In a country of professed meritocratic competition, this badge has long ensured an unerring privilege, represented in a 220-year monopoly on the highest office in the land.” Coates continued with a catalogue of widely disseminated misinformation regarding the first black president of the United States:

For the preservation of the badge, insidious rumors were concocted to denigrate the first black White House. Obama gave free cellphones to disheveled welfare recipients. Obama went to Europe and complained that “ordinary men and women are too small-minded to govern their own affairs.” Obama had inscribed an Arabic saying on his wedding ring, then stopped wearing the ring, in observance of Ramadan. He canceled the National Day of Prayer; refused to sign certificates for Eagle Scouts; faked his attendance at Columbia University; and used a teleprompter to address a group of elementary-school students. The badge-holders fumed. They wanted their country back.

—Coates 2017

Such malicious rumormongering is bound to exacerbate the pressure that comes with the presidency, let alone the pressure of becoming a racial trailblazer. It might even make one angry. But Obama was in a tough spot. For one, until recently, it was unacceptable for a president to go about raging. More pertinent, the stereotype of the angry black man has been embedded in the country’s imagination for centuries. One onus of being African American is the need to stay emotionally cool, lest you further frighten a white populace already scared by the color of your skin. As he showed for his eight years in office, he knew how to be detached and cerebral.

It’s a good thing he had an anger translator. This was the premise of a popular running skit on *Key & Peele* (2012–15), a Comedy Central series that helped fill the void left by Chappelle’s retreat from the public eye. In these skits, Jordan Peele played the levelheaded Obama, right down to an uncanny delivery of his measured cadence. Standing behind him, gesticulating wildly, shouting, dancing, cursing, was Keegan-Michael Key’s Luther, the president’s anger translator.

It is an ingenious concept: the black president cannot afford to get angry, so he has hired an interpreter to get angry for him. Peele’s Obama sits calmly, facing the camera, and explains. Key’s Luther, who rarely stops moving, remains in a constant state of indignant freak-out. As Meredith Blake (2015) wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, “By inventing an exuberantly profane alter ego, played by Key, who gave voice to Obama’s bottled-up anger, the show successfully satirized a president whose unflappable demeanor and history-making ascension to the White House had made him a tricky target for comedy.”

The timing was perfect. *Key & Peele* premiered in 2012, in the midst of Obama's re-election campaign against former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. Obama's foes smelled blood, and saw a genuine chance to get their badge back. But after a rocky showing in the first televised debate, Obama regained his footing in the following two. Things were looking up. However, Obama, unlike the current occupant of the White House, was not one to gloat aggressively.

Enter Luther, willing to lend a hand and gauge the post-debate mood. "Now is not a time to tally points or keep the score," Peele's smooth Obama intones. But Luther has no qualms about that: "2-1, Obama! Game, set, match, touchdown, home run, checkmate!" And then, with an exasperated shriek: "Can we get back to work now?!" Luther is in trash talk mode, like a basketball player trying to get under an opponent's skin. "Governor Romney, why you smiling while you're getting your ass kicked? Are we debating, or are you trying to sell me a Lexus?" Luther is Obama's unleashed id. Like his fantasy counterparts, Mays Gilliam and Black Bush, he only knows how to keep it real.

Soon Obama and Luther were back to celebrate victory, and they continued on to the end of *Key & Peele* in 2015. By then Obama had caught wind of the skits, and he got the joke easily. How could he not? And so, for the 2015 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, the president invited Key's Luther to the stage to serve as his real-life anger translator.

Addressing the assembled press, Obama strode into his high diplomatic form: "Despite our differences, we can count on the press to shed light on the most important issues of the day." Luther's amped-up translation: "Yeah, and we can count on Fox News to terrify old white people with some nonsense!" Then, in a state of faux-panic: "Sharia Law is coming to Cleveland! Run for the damn hills!"

Things continue in this vein for a few minutes, until Obama lands on the subject of climate change. Now it's time to flip the script. It's finally time for the black president to get angry in public. "What about our kids?" he asks, his voice slowly rising. "What kind of stupid, short-sighted, irresponsible bull. . ."

Luther looks alarmed. He tries to calm the president. "What?!" Obama shouts at his translator. Hands in the air, Luther gives up: "All due respect, sir? You don't need an anger translator. You need counseling." And he exits the stage. It was a moment of comedic catharsis—with the end of his final term in sight, Obama has allowed himself to feed the fires within.

Comedians often complained about how hard it is to make comedic hay of Obama. His presence suggests reservoirs of dignity, practiced or natural. He rarely flies off the handle. He's regarded as one of the greatest orators to hold the office. As one observer noted, "It's hard to satirize competence" (Miller 2017). While Peele conveyed such competence in his impression, Keegan cracked the harder part of the code by speculating how Obama might *want* to

behave, if given license to release what he must publicly hide. For all of Obama's power, he still needs someone to get angry for him.

If Obama presented a challenge of reserve for comedic interpretation, Donald Trump creates the opposite problem. In short, how do you make fun of a walking self-parody? When the real thing is unlike what we've seen before, what are the comedic reference points? How can you top the genuine article? *South Park* co-creator Trey Parker addressed this comedic dilemma in explaining why the scorched-earth animated comedy series stopped using a character resembling Trump: "We were really trying [on *South Park*] to make fun of what was going on but we couldn't keep up and what was actually happening was much funnier than anything we could come up with."

This is the flipside of political comedy in the age of Trump: how do you parody that which exceeds conventional notions of the ridiculous? It is a challenge faced on a regular basis by late-night television hosts including Stephen Colbert on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* (CBS), Samantha Bee on *Full Frontal With Samantha Bee* (TBS), and John Oliver on *Last Week Tonight* (HBO). Colbert, Bee, and Oliver are all alumni of *The Daily Show*, the political comedy juggernaut driven by Jon Stewart. Stewart stepped down for his *Daily Show* duties in 2015, just in time to miss the current madness.

Oliver addressed the challenge head-on in the 2018 season opener of *Last Week Tonight*, broadcast February 18 on HBO. Oliver specializes in long, winding commentaries that incorporate video clips, onscreen graphics, and a keen sense of the absurd. Tonight's central topic: Trump vs. The World.

Oliver began the sequence with a montage mocking the "America first" talking point featured in what seems like every Trump speech. He showed several examples, then made a joke of how the rest of the world might see such patriotic hyperbole: "If you are a foreign country watching that, you may wonder: when has America's attitude not been 'America first?'" The fact that Oliver isn't American—he was born in Birmingham, UK—gave his jab an extra jolt of authority.

Next came another montage, this one showing Trump telling audiences that America is seen as a laughing stock by the rest of the world. Oliver quickly seized on the irony—it is Trump who plays the role of international laughing stock, as he illustrated with a series of Trump parodies from countries including Spain, Israel, Pakistan, Bulgaria, Taiwan, Ethiopia, and Italy. All feature actors with blonde wigs in various stages of buffoonery.

And this is where Oliver zoomed in on the dilemma facing Trump mockers the world over. "Are any of these funny?" Oliver asks of the various impressions. "Is anything about Trump funny anymore? Somehow the world's most objectionably laughable human has become a comedy graveyard where laughter goes to die."

How to navigate that graveyard and bring back the dead? You would be forgiven if you didn't pick *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) as the show to provide

the answer. Once a sharp-edged source of social satire, the home of giants from John Belushi to Eddie Murphy, *SNL* had long since dipped into irrelevance as the 2016 presidential campaign heated up. Skits seemed to flounder for a hook, a punch line, or a simple reason for being. Sketches you would once expect to fill out the last fifteen minutes of airtime, when many viewers had gone to bed, appeared near the top of the broadcast. The show had gone toothless.

Then *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels asked Alec Baldwin to play Trump. It actually was not his idea: Tina Fey, whose appearances as vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin were a hit in 2008, suggested her former *30 Rock* costar don the blonde wig. Baldwin saw the inherent challenges. “It’s exhausting,” he said recently. “I’m hoping I can come up with someone else I can imitate. Pence?” (Jones 2017). But he figured he’d try it on for size and give it a go for country and comedy.

This was October 2016, during the debate season leading up to the presidential election. But the comedic source material had already largely been laid out in the open: bombastic statements, obsessive Tweeting, bizarre hand gestures, disrespect of women and minorities. Baldwin took the stage opposite Kate McKinnon, playing Hillary Clinton, with Michael Che playing debate moderator Lester Holt. Chris Jones describes what ensued:

“Good evening, America,” Baldwin said on that first jittery Saturday. “I am going to be so good tonight.”

There was no way to predict what happened next. The crowd packed into the balcony above him laughed and cheered with an elusive abandon. Steve Higgins, a longtime producer at *SNL*, remembers the feeling in the room. “It was like a shot of electricity went through the studio. It was like a punch to the face. It was undeniable.”

—Jones 2017

Baldwin figured this would be a short-timer gig, over and done with come November. Then something unexpected happened. Trump won the election. Now *SNL* needed someone to wring laughter not from candidate Trump, but from President Trump. So Baldwin stuck around, and *Saturday Night Live* found a groove—and its best ratings since 1993, when the top cast members included Mike Myers, Chris Rock, and Adam Sandler (Jones 2017).

The Trump administration brought more than just Trump to the *SNL* party. With every passing week *SNL* became a three-ring political circus, stocked with a roster of perfectly cast players. Melissa McCarthy jumped in to play White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, berating reporters for asking simple questions, shooting a water gun into the assembled press, and eventually revving his mobile podium into the crowd, a perfect visualization of political chaos.

Kate McKinnon took on double duty, playing brazen White House spin-doctor Kellyanne Conway and Attorney General Jeff Sessions, both of whom gave her far more to work with than the comparatively staid Clinton. Her Conway is a sort of press-hungry vampire who feeds on press exposure; she stalks TV anchors until they relent and put her on the air. The October 14, 2017 episode found her literally in the sewer, made up as Pennywise, the killer clown from *It*, plying CNN anchor Anderson Cooper (Alex Moffat) with readymade, frighteningly Conway-like quotes (“Puerto Rico actually was worse before Hurricane Maria, and the hurricane actually blew some buildings back together, and I don’t know why Elizabeth Warren won’t Tweet about that”). McKinnon’s Sessions, meanwhile, is a pint-sized good ol’ boy, ever pliant, not particularly bright, and racist in the manner of a young Southern child from the middle of the last century. In one skit from the March 4, 2017 episode, she turns Sessions into Forrest Gump, sitting on a bus step and getting folksy with whoever joins him on the bench. “I’m the attorney general of the whole United States,” he drawls to an unsuspecting stranger. “I got to meet the president and everything.” And then: “I always say life is like a box of chocolates. Sure are a lot of brown ones in there!”

The work of McCarthy and McKinnon, who joined Baldwin as 2017 Emmy winners, had a particular poignancy. Women have led the outcry against a presidential administration led by an alleged sexual predator, and which often seems bent on bringing back the traditional gender roles of centuries past. In picking comediennes to play Spicer and Sessions, *SNL* not so subtly asserts that such rigidly defined roles are a thing of the past, regardless of who occupies the White House. McCarthy, sadly, has no more call to play Spicer, who is no longer employed by Trump. But the real Spicer showed, like Obama did at the 2016 Correspondents’ Dinner, that he can still laugh at himself. He appeared at the Emmy Awards—the same show that honored McCarthy for her work as Spicer—as himself, hyping up the number of viewers for the Emmys much as he did the attendance at Trump’s inauguration. When he finished, host Stephen Colbert delivered the kicker: “Melissa McCarthy, everybody. Give it up.”

Baldwin’s Trump, however, remains the tip of the show’s newly sharpened political spear. First there’s the look, and demeanor. “He opens his left eye wide, he nearly closes his right eye, and he pushes out his wet lips as far as his chin will allow, his mouth turned suddenly into a bottomless black pit. His hands fly up, his fingers doing ridiculous, discordant things.” This isn’t one of those eerie facsimile impressions, the ones you can’t distinguish from the real thing when you close your eyes. It’s “not Trump, exactly, but some nightmarish goof on Trump, a distillation of everything gross about him, boiled clean of any remnant that could be mistaken for competence or redemption.” It is satire as a sharp weapon. It’s “almost like an abstract painting, not of Trump the man but of Trump’s withered soul” (Jones 2017).

Who would have thought a withered soul could be so funny? Much of the credit must go to Trump himself, who fills the weekly news cycle with more material than any single show could possibly handle. It's often been noted that Trump has turned the country into his own reality TV show. He hurls insults at world leaders. He gets up early in the morning to vent his spleen on Twitter. He treats every perceived slight as a grievous insult, and comes up with pithy, derogatory nicknames for anyone who speaks of him in less than glowing terms. Yet, as previously noted, these self-parodying qualities can defy parody. This difficulty makes the Trump-fueled *SNL* renaissance all the more remarkable.

Take the recent blow-up over professional athletes kneeling during the national anthem as a means of protest against racism and other societal ills. Trump has railed frequently against these mostly black protestors, insisting at one rally that NFL owners fire any perpetrators. But sometimes railing just isn't enough. That's when Trump sends his vice president, Mike Pence, to an Indianapolis Colts/San Francisco 49ers game with instructions to walk out if any players kneel. The 49ers started the kneeling-for-the-anthem tradition, so it was a pretty good bet at least some of their players would continue that Sunday. Predictably, they did. Even more predictably, Pence left. The theatrical quality of politics is rarely so telegraphed.

The whole stunt was red meat for Baldwin and *Saturday Night Live*. On that week's show, which aired October 14, 2017, Baldwin's Trump addressed a rally in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He begins with standard fare: "We're getting rid of everything Obama did. We're ripping out all the vegetables in Michelle Obama's garden and planting McNuggets." But that is just a warm-up for the sketch's centerpiece, in which Trump places a series of phone calls from the podium to Pence to check on who is being naughty and who is being nice.

Trump first reaches Pence at an Indianapolis Pacers basketball game and demands to know if any players are kneeling. Pence reports that, yes, one player has taken a knee. "Get out of there now!" shouts the president. "Bail! Haul ass, Mike." Soon he checks in with Pence at a Starbucks. The president wants to know if the cups are emblazoned with "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays," a nod to the alleged "war on Christmas" that has become a pet issue for those seeking to prove their pious bona fides. Pence responds that it is a bit early in the year for such greetings, and the cups read, "Pumpkin spice is back." Trump's response: "Get out of there, Mike! Bail! Vamoose!" The president then explains his rage to the crowd: "You can't disrespect our lord and savior Santa Claus like that."

A live, weekly series has the luxury of riffing off the news of the week; much as journalism has long been considered the first draft of history, *SNL* has become the first draft of comedy. The format has proved to be a perfect fit for Trump World, in which something noteworthy if not bizarre transpires every week, if not every day. There are also macro-view Trump comedy projects,

including a mock memoir co-written by Baldwin and Kurt Andersen, *You Can't Spell America Without Me*. But *SNL* has generally been first to the scene of the crime.

Saturday Night Live has had fun at the expense of presidents since the show's inception in 1975. Chevy Chase played Gerald Ford as a stumblebum. As S. Robert Lichter, Jody C. Baumgartner, and Jonathan S. Morris remind us, "cast member Chevy Chase launched each show by taking a pratfall onstage . . . Chase turned Ford's falls into a running gag in which he bumped into or knocked over various unlikely objects, such as the Oval Office desk" (Lichter et al. 2015: 45). Yes, Ford did stumble on his way down the steps of Air Force One in 1975. But there's also some irony here: Ford was also a skilled and graceful college athlete. Dan Ayckroyd portrayed Jimmy Carter as an avuncular if self-serious country bumpkin. Darrell Hammond made Bill Clinton into a glad-handing, slippery, and libidinous Bubba. Dana Carvey played up the first President Bush's perceived blandness and penchant for rote phrasing; Will Ferrell accentuated the second President Bush's blustering confidence. But Baldwin's Trump is an angrier caricature, delivered with a dash of comedic arsenic. You get the feeling Baldwin takes it personally, and he does: "Jokes are supposed to provide an escape, for the listener and the teller. Instead, Baldwin lives in a state of constant reminder. His country is so far from his hopes for it, and now people won't stop asking this liberal New Yorker to portray the primary vessel of his disappointments" (Borchers 2017).

Yet Baldwin is far from powerless. He is mining a tradition that includes *Mr. Smith*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Candidate*, *In the Loop*, *Veep*, *Head of State*, *Chappelle's Show*, *Key & Peele*, and too many others to even begin to catalog. These endeavors don't set policy. They don't sign executive orders, or vote on bills, or vote on candidates. Instead, they wield the weapon of comedy and elicit the antidote of laughter. They take gleefully sadistic pleasure in holding feet to the fire, and their targets, even those that show they get the joke by joining in the fun, can't help but feel the burn (even if they do not all, like Trump, fire off Tweets attacking their impersonators). This is the power of comedy. We expect it to knock political power down a notch or two, and perhaps even salve our wounds in the process. And we take a certain kind of pleasure when comedy pulls back the curtain and reveals power to be a double-edged sword, making the powerful appear as powerless as the rest of us.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Laughter

ERIC WEITZ

THE VIEW FROM MARS

At a loss as to where to begin a mid-century critical survey of historical thought on his subject, D.H. Monro decided to adopt the voice of a naïve outsider. He imagined an explorer's field report to the Martian Society for Terrestrial Research on a curiosity found in earthlings:

Laughter is a phenomenon almost universal among men. According to some investigators, it exists also among the other animals, at least in a rudimentary form. It is marked by easily recognizable physical manifestations, and almost certainly by accompanying bodily changes, such as the oxygenation of the blood. It is also marked by a peculiar mental, or psychical, condition.

—Monro 1951: 13

The life scientist from another planet then likens laughter to anger and fear in that they display recognizable physical symptoms, adding the following caveat: “But the peculiarity of laughter is that its causes have not yet been summed up in any simple formula” (1951: 14). Seventy years later, through the multidisciplinary flowering of empirical inquiry in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we have discovered a lot about laughter and its distinctly human complexities even if its list of causes continues to resist unifying theory. And although many an essay on laughter does tend to slide toward discussion of what triggers it, this one will do its best to retain a primary focus on the bodied utterance itself.

There is by now apparent consensus on a handful of general points about laughter: it is universal in humans and sufficiently consistent as to be recognizable across cultures; it involves vocal utterance that differs essentially from language (even though it may sometimes combine with speech); it actualizes positive affect derived through social unification; and individually it bespeaks a psycho-physical boost. It is, at the same time, infinitely more entangled, far-reaching, and open to debate. The following discussion will attempt a panoramic view of laughter in the modern age by way of a whistle-stop tour taking in diverse points of interest. It will not, of course, make it to all worthy areas of interest—for example, issues of laughter across cultures and languages—and it will favor English-language contexts.

Laughter as a ubiquitous multifunctional occurrence in everyday life is not so much hiding in plain sight from earnest contemplation, but ubiquitous for all to see in its power and nuance, teasing those who would grasp its bearing upon human experience and interaction. While this chapter will touch upon assorted angles of interest relevant to laughter in the modern age, it will at the same time retain three main organizing thrusts: (1) the arrival upon current states of thought about laughter through the empirical study of it by the natural and social sciences from the late twentieth century, as well as continuing efforts from philosophical quarters to illuminate its lived experience from inside and out; (2) thought over the past century regarding the function of laughter individually, socially, and politically; and (3) the boundless corpus of laughter as and in performance, with its multifaceted interrogation of representation, embodiment, experience, and the dynamics of social interaction. It can be acknowledged in advance that points sometimes decline to fall discreetly within just one of the headings and may occasionally look toward one or both of the other themes.

TOWARD A STATE OF PLAY IN RESEARCH AND THOUGHT ON LAUGHTER

Laughter began to receive earnest scholarly attention from the social sciences in the 1960s, culminating in a First International Conference on Humour and Laughter in Cardiff, Wales in 1976 (Davis 2003). Writing in the landmark collection of essays *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (Goldstein and McGhee 1972), Patricia Keith-Spiegel recaps some of the common threads of science-based thought, invoking a “heyday” of humor theorizing” in “the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century” (1972: 4–5). She was perhaps unaware at the time that she stood on the threshold of what we might now call the Modern Era of Laughter, Humor, and Comedy Studies, which has featured analytical advances in the social sciences and increased clinical and technological sophistication in the computer age, with its heightened capacity to collect, store, and parse data.

Keith-Spiegel notes, among other things, a consensus that laughter and humor are “universal phenomena” that have survived in the species for utilitarian purposes, and that laughter’s earliest functions served communication and group unity. A number of researchers in the first half of the twentieth century saw in it the residue of and substitute for physical aggression, leading to a present-day embodiment of ridicule (Keith-Spiegel 1972: 5–6). Keith-Spiegel reports: “Laughter and humor have been hailed as ‘good for the body’ because they restore homeostasis, stabilize blood pressure, oxygenate the blood, massage the vital organs, stimulate circulation, facilitate digestion, relax the system, and produce a feeling of well-being” (1972: 6). This nod to laughter’s health benefits would foreshadow the swell of popular and professional interest that was to come several years later with the publication of Norman Cousins’s book, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (1979). It chronicled the journalist and writer’s diagnosis with a terminal illness and the seeming miraculous responses of his body to a self-prescribed program of laughter through daily doses of Marx Brothers films and *Candid Camera* television episodes. There persists active and varied research regarding laughter and wellbeing, stress reduction and pain management, in light, for example, of its release of endorphins (Dunbar et al. 2012), as well as its benefits for the heart (Law et al. 2018). There would appear a general tendency for studies to support the popular conceit that laughter assists beneficially in matters of wellness, and of psycho-emotional maintenance and repair in general. Laughter’s reputation for spiritual uplift and its concomitant health benefits have been widely noted in other contexts, regarding the likes of religious orders, clown doctors, and Laughter Yoga (Berger 1997; Peacock 2009; DeCaro and Brown 2016). The Japan Society for Laughter and Humor Studies (JSLHS), established in 1994, includes amongst its initiatives an advocacy for the health benefits of laughter (Abe 2010; Ito and Sumiyoshi 2018).

In an attempt to distill the state of laughter research at a more recent moment in time, Jürgen Trouvain and Khiet P. Truong conclude that mutual laughter in particular “creates a form of social bonding; that is, it is a display of affiliation, and can usually be associated with a pleasurable atmosphere” (2017: 341–2), citing several studies. Laughter also lends support to participants in guiding and managing the flow of conversation, not infrequently attending or responding to utterances without humorous intent. Robert R. Provine notes a “punctuation effect” for the placement of laughter in conversation, citing “evidence that laughing and speaking are different kinds of vocalizations controlled by different neurological systems” (2016: 1536; also 2000). He and others call attention to biological mechanisms in laughter that make it contagious (Provine 2000; Gervais and Wilson 2005; Dunbar et al. 2012; Nelson 2012). Wide and varied research carried out on laughter also includes gelotophobia, a genuine fear of being laughed at (Ruch and Proyer 2008; Titze 2009). Summaries of

empirical laughter research can be found, among other places, in Provine (2016), Dunbar et al. (2012), and Ruch and Ekman (2001). Anthropologist Alexander Kozintsev picks through a vast, multidisciplinary thicket of literature on humor and laughter and emerges with the conviction that laughter remains detachable from whatever may cause it, hot-wired in us as a protective revolt against all manner of serious ties with the world (2012; see also Chafe 2009).

Phillip Glenn and Elizabeth Holt raise intriguing points regarding the study of laughter in conversation analysis, what it “does” in actual communicative contexts:

Broadly speaking, laughter shows up time and time again in two kinds of environments: celebrations and trouble. In moments of celebration, it allows people to laugh together, appreciate, affiliate, and even claim a kind of intimacy. In moments of trouble, it provides a resource for aligning, modifying actions, and mitigating meanings.

—2013: 2

Glenn and Holt refer to the “laugh particle” as a basic unit of analysis. And for all that we tend to talk about—and, indeed, recognize—laughter aurally and visually as a generic embodied event, they indicate the extent to which closer inspection renders the single word incapable of embracing the breadth of its sound, physicality, and interactional nuance. These qualitative differences and gradations can carry important communicative value in context and include its mingling with speaking and smiling (2013: 6). The MAHNOB Laughter database (<https://mahnob-db.eu/laughter>) is publicly available and contains 563 “laughter episodes” of varying kinds recorded from twenty-two subjects (Petridis et al. 2013).

In attempts to characterize the bodied utterance itself, Provine has foregrounded laughter from a science-based orientation as instinctive, social, and vocalized:

You can visualize laughter as a series of evenly spaced sonic beads on a string. Each “bead” corresponds to a short, vowel-like laugh-note (syllable) (i.e., “ha,” “ho,” “he,” as transcribed in English) that has a duration (diameter) of about 1/15 second (75 milliseconds). The beads are spaced at regular intervals (onset to onset) of about 1/5 second (210 milliseconds). Laughs typically proceed with a decrescendo, a gradual reduction in loudness as the laugh progresses.

—2000: 57

If the social sciences brought to the regard of laughter an ability to isolate and measure the workings of the body, twentieth-century philosophy—

especially a particular strain from the continent—was attempting to expose the utterly human phenomenon through its everyday apperception. In some cases, it pressed upon the capacity of language to impart a sense of the unarticulable. In his description of laughter, Jean-Luc Nancy, like Provine, gives prominence to the element of vocalization:

Laughter is the sound of a voice that is not a voice, that is not the voice it is. It is the material and the timbre of the voice, and it is not the voice. It is between the color of the voice, its modulation (or its modeledness) and its articulation. Laughter laughs a voice without the qualities of a voice. It is like the very substance of the voice, indeed, like its subject, but a substance that disappears in presenting itself.

—1993: 388

We find here descriptions from objective and subjective sides of the aisle, which, placed side by side, make arguably for a fuller picture of the human phenomenon than either individually can supply. Here are two more such outside-inside views that make for interesting consideration. Evolutionary anthropologists have surmised that laughter developed in prehistoric bodies as a call of “All Clear” or “False Alarm” to be passed amongst the group as quickly and clearly as possible for purposes of safety and psychic conservation (Hurley et al. 2011). As Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams note, a biological feature may find repurposing if no longer needed for its original function. In this case, laughter’s pleasurable upsurge has come to reward us for the spontaneous correction of a mistaken preconception—jokes serve as textual traps that lead us down a certain path, suddenly to reveal a “false belief” through the alternative sense rendered in the punch line: “In short, (basic) mirth is the pleasure in unearthing a particular variety of mistake in active belief structures. And (basic) humor is any semantic circumstance (any convergence of contentful elements at a particular time)—exogenous or endogenous—in which we make such a mistake and succeed in discovering it” (Hurley et al. 2011: 117). The species-serving rewards of laughter have been linked to sexual pleasure (Miller 1988; Phillips 2000), as have their respective testaments to strong and distinctly individualized embodied response (Gray 1994).

Recent philosophically inclined thinkers on laughter (e.g., Berger 1997; Critchley 2002; Prusack 2006) find value in Helmut Plessner’s notion of the “eccentric position,” based on an entwining of a “body” and the “person” to whom it belongs (1970: 148). For Plessner, humans and other animals are their bodies, so to speak, while only humans are capable of considering their embodiment. Critchley explains the distinction in that, “the human being not only lives and experiences, he or she experiences those experiences” (2002: 28). The gap therein needs perpetual maintenance, and at moments of impasse

we drop into our bodies, thereby erupting into laughing or crying, and in so doing incarnate the fact of our humanity: “When a man laughs, he gives way to his own body and thus foregoes unity with it and control over it. With this capitulation as a unity of ensouled body and mind, he asserts himself as a person” (Plessner 1970: 142). Plessner then sees laughter (and crying) as an eruption that occurs when the demands of some or other circumstance—in, for example, the realms of joy, play, the comic, wit and humor, or embarrassment and despair—become untenable or “unanswerable” within the boundaries of our psychic integrity: “With the disappearance of this referent for accommodation between being and having a body, disorganization is at hand: the two modes split immediately apart, the body emancipates itself as the instrument and sounding board of the person” (1970: 150).

Plessner’s contention that, “The laughing person is open to the world” (1970: 146) evokes a twentieth-century tendency to allude to laughter’s capacity for penetrating exposure of the person within. Psychoanalytic literary critic Norman Holland asserts that, “In laughing, we suddenly and playfully recreate our identities” (1982: 198), while Anca Parvulescu contends, “Laughter is an opening in which a self unfolds” (2010: 5). A path to openness is viewed in aspirational terms by strains of Eastern thought, which see laughter as a manifestation of enlightenment (Morreall 1989, 2009); Ingvild Sælid Gilhus characterizes it as a direct function of spiritual illumination: “The goal of a fruitful opening up of the body is present in Zen in the use of laughter and joking” (1997: 124).

THE FUNCTION AND PURPOSE OF LAUGHTER IN SOCIETY

Many researchers refer to a 2005 effort by Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson, which includes attention to its social uses and effects, to assemble and synthesize existing research on laughter. The work of Gervais and Wilson reaffirms laughter as a socializing behavior found universally among humans, emerging naturally between ages two and six months. Neuroscientists distinguish between two types of laughter, which are traced to two different neural systems: “Duchenne laughter” is an involuntary response to an outside stimulus and fully involves facial muscles around the mouth and eyes; “non-Duchenne laughter” involves strategic or pseudo-spontaneous simulation of the response on behalf of a person as social agent. Non-Duchenne laughter is considered a canny co-opting of the body’s laughter program: “Whereas Duchenne laughter originally evolved in the context of protohumor and functioned as a medium of joyful emotional contagion, non-Duchenne laughter came to occur in aggressive, nervous, or hierarchical contexts, functioning to signal, to appease, to manipulate, to deride, or to subvert” (2005: 418).

Gervais and Wilson conclude:

Laughter serves myriad functions in modern human society. These range from facilitating emotional stability and health, curtailing negative emotion and stress, and promoting socialization, to lubricating social interaction, easing tensions and competition, delineating and maintaining group identities, and coordinating the emotions and behaviors of a group. Laughter thus functions on multiple levels, from individual physiology and psychology to dyadic and group-based interactions.

—2005: 404

As we might expect, social scientists have looked more deeply into this distinction between “spontaneous” and “volitional” laughter, and Provine observes a prevalence of the non-Duchenne variety in social interaction (2000: 40–3). They note variables found in any collection of laughters (e.g., intensity, pitch) alongside differences in production and our abilities to perceive them (Lavan et al. 2016). As a mode of communication, laughter is considered more like primate calls or bird songs than language (Gervais and Wilson 2005; Provine 2016); as psychoanalyst Martin Grotjahn has proposed, “Laughter is loud because it calls for company” ([1957] 1966: 33).

Viewed from a grounding in psychotherapy and social work, Judith Kay Nelson claims laughter as an “attachment behavior,” tethering infant and carer to one another for regulation of affect in the earliest stages of a child’s development: “Engaging with a caregiver in playful, positive interactions through laughter is the beginning stage in learning how to interact and make one’s way in the world of social relationships and also in learning about the affects those interactions generate” (2012: 18). This approach emphasizes the “dyadic” nature of the behavior: the importance of both the child’s and grown-up’s laughters. Through this dialogic connection infants build a sense of security from which they can take the necessary steps to stretch their boundaries and which benefits the growing human’s capacity to expand horizons: “The need for exploration and play is central for learning about and adapting to our environment, which is necessary for learning and survival” (2012: 19).

Vestiges of this laughter persist in and through later life, although with far more complexity, but serve to explain an emphasis placed on the social-cohesion element of laughter in sharing, building, and spreading positive affect. Nelson points out that laughter comes to engage with other systems of behavior, explaining the potential for its variation within the same laugher as it links with the sexual/mating, the fear/wariness, and the conflict/aggression systems. Anthropologist Mahadev Apte cites research by J.A.R.A.M. Van Hooft to observe that smiling and laughing may have derived from different evolutionary behaviors but have grown to overlap. The “grin face” or silent and vocalized

“bare-teeth” display, appearing in most mammals, expresses fear and defensiveness under threat; it sends a submissive signal. The “play face,” found among primates and featuring a wide-open mouth and quick, staccato breathing, is seen to have developed as a signal for play, including mock fighting (Apte 1985: 244–5). As humor scholar John Morreall sums up, “In human evolution, according to van Hooff and others, the friendly, silent, bared-teeth display became our social smile of appeasement. The relaxed open-mouth display and its accompanying vocalization became laughter” (2009: 38).

It is possible to perceive in laughter such currents that elude the head-on grasps of empirical tools and direct philosophical inquiry. This brings us to a broad and unacknowledged mode of laughter study: its observation and investigation through representation, citation, and discussion in creative endeavor. Laughter in any text carries the facility to illuminate facets of human experience over and above the mere reference to or replication of a recognizable human behavior. In the modern age, laughter has been implicated in a handful of themes, both timely and transcending.

Good and Evil

The Czech-born writer Milan Kundera sketches two kinds of laughter in archetypally spiritual terms in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* ([1978] 1980). Kundera describes the first instance of an angel confronted with the devil’s laughter, its infectiousness and its ridicule of God’s good works causing the angel to produce a knockoff of that laughter with opposing intention, “whereas the devil’s laughter denoted the absurdity of things, the angel on the contrary meant to rejoice over how well ordered, wisely conceived, good, and meaningful everything here below was” ([1978] 1980: 87). Kundera acknowledges the allure of angelic laughter, while remaining suspicious of its uncritical consensus-seeking:

In origin, laughter is thus of the devil’s domain. It has something malicious about it (things suddenly turning out different from what they pretended to be), but to some extent also a beneficent relief (things are less weighty than they appeared to be, letting us live more freely, no longer oppressing us with their austere seriousness).

—Kundera [1978] 1980: 86

Laughter’s delivery of pleasure coupled with the social reward of being its supplier may well feed commercial inclinations toward easy production and audience comfort. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer had made the case in a 1944 essay regarding laughter and its collusion with “fun” at the behest of the “pleasure industry.” Laughter leads us down the disingenuously merry path to herd-like gratification, which in its terms is to say, obedience. It is, they

assert, the hidden opposite of the human deliverance we think we are celebrating in our collective laughter: “The supreme law is that they shall not satisfy their desires at any price; they must laugh and be content with laughter” ([1944] 1993: 11). For Adorno and Horkheimer, we should enjoy the embodied charge, because it is all we get and quite beside the point of any genuine feeling of a thing called happiness.

It is, in fact, often asserted that the laughing body serves ultimately at the behest of dominant discourses in the normalization of thought and behavior. Sociologist Michael Billig proposes that the wiring for such a behavior-modification effect is installed in us as children. He argues that grown-ups teach us the rules of the world at least in part by inscribing the feeling we know as “embarrassment,” for failure in demonstrating competence in conforming to the building blocks of approved behavior: “What is embarrassing is typically comic to onlookers. Social actors fear this laughter. Accordingly, the prospect of ridicule and embarrassment protects the codes of daily behavior, ensuring much routine conformity with social order” (Billig 2010: 202).

Indeed, the laughing body has often been seen to display an unseemly loss of dignity, to make a “spectacle” of itself. The colonization of our bodies through laughter strategies for the purposes of crowd control may represent a suspicion well placed. Laughter can be regarded as an effective dual-action “technology” in Michel Foucault’s (1984) biopolitical sense. The hilarity-riven body calls out others who diverge too far from approved corridors of social thought and comportment—the unappetizing prospect of becoming the target in turn places an implicit restraining order on one’s own participation in such behaviors.

Liberation

In an interlude from Kundera’s *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* ([1978] 1980), two favorite students of schoolteacher Madame Raphael are giving a class presentation about Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* in which they don homemade horns to simulate the titular beasts. The girls are at first humiliated by the mocking laughter of the other students, but their beloved teacher sees their effort through loving eyes. She beckons them to join her in a spontaneous, laughing, ring dance, as “imperceptibly Gabrielle and Michelle’s grimace of sobbing became the grimace of laughter” ([1978] 1980: 104). The teacher and the two students then seem to enter their own world, as Madame Raphael rises off the floor and toward an opening in the ceiling:

They rose higher and higher through that opening, their cardboard noses were no longer visible, and now there were only three pairs of shoes passing through the gaping hole, but these too finally vanished, while from on high, the dumbfounded students heard the fading, radiant laughter of three archangels.

—[1978] 1980: 104

There is, of course, another instance of gravity-defying laughter more to the center of popular culture, namely the “Laughing Gas” episode from P.L. Travers’ *Mary Poppins* (1934). In the literary original, the now iconic nanny takes two of her young charges, Jane and Michael, to the house of her uncle, Mr. Wigg. They enter his lodgings, unable to locate the source of his hearty welcome until they look up to find him sitting in mid-air, his head bobbing just beneath the ceiling. Eventually, the children find themselves laughing uncontrollably at the spectacle of their hilarity-stricken host, and Jane is the first to attain lift-off:

As she laughed she felt herself growing lighter and lighter, just as though she were being pumped full of air. It was a curious and delicious feeling and it made her want to laugh all the more. And then suddenly, with a bouncing bounce, she felt herself jumping through the air. Michael, to his astonishment, saw her go soaring up through the room. With a little bump her head touched the ceiling then she went bouncing along it till she reached Mr Wigg.

—Travers [1934] 2016: 40

Interestingly, Mary Poppins, the one character with acknowledged magical capacities, provides a stern, agelastic ballast to the mood. When she joins the other three in the air, she does so simply because she can, rather than due to the effects of laughing gas. The physical embodiment of this scene in the 1964 film, *Mary Poppins* (dir. Robert Stevenson) includes the song, “I Love to Laugh.” Julie Andrews inserts disapproving rejoinders amidst the song’s sung lyrics (e.g., “It’s embarrassing!”), initiating a brief catalog of laugh types in her verse, taken up by Dick Van Dyke as Bert, and finished off by Ed Wynn as Uncle Albert acknowledging his own laugh. No doubt these laugh types were generated with an eye toward their comic illustration by the actors, but they could also be seen as examples of the laughter trying in some way to stifle, minimize, or cover the explosion of an unrestrained release—giving oneself up to the body. In both texts, Mary Poppins becomes the unlikely defender of seamliness, despite what would appear to be the incarnation of bodied and by extension psychic freedom described by Travers and enacted in Disney.

Sociologist Anton Zijderveld, referring to Plessner’s take on the distinction between “being” a body (spiritually, psychically) and “having” a body (materially, biologically), discussed above, notes: “With crying and laughing, the body-one-has appears to have taken over from the body-one-is: the first has overruled the second and run off” (Zijderveld 1983: 28)—or floated away, as suggested in the past few instances, born by the lift of spirit incarnated in laughter.

Jouissance and Resistance

The notion of laughter as a psychic swan dive into bodied indulgence invites a return to *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and its references to Annie

Leclerc's 1970s feminist manifesto, translated into English as *Woman's Word* (*Parole de femme*, 1974). Kundera quotes from Leclerc on "laughter, an immense and delicious sensual pleasure, wholly sensual pleasure . . ." (Kundera [1978] 1980: 79), something of a sisterly revolution in itself:

I said to my sister, or she said to me, come over, shall we play laughter? We stretched out side by side on a bed and began. By pretending, of course. Forced laughter. Laughable laughter. Laughter so laughable it made us laugh. Then it came, real laughter, total laughter, taking us into its immense tide. Bursts of repeated, rushing, unleashed laughter, magnificent laughter, sumptuous and mad . . . And we laugh our laughter to the infinity of laughter . . . O laughter! Laughter of sensual pleasure, sensual pleasure of laughter; to laugh is to live profoundly.

—[1978] 1980: 79

This, no doubt, would be the kind of unleashed carnal joy that has so unnerved advocates for "civilized" amusement through the ages. Leclerc sees in archetypal screen heroes of the time—like John Wayne, Gregory Peck, Henry Fonda, and Burt Lancaster—a patriarchally assured inscrutability. By a quick substitution of lens they become classic comic butts for the unreflective seriousness with which they regard themselves (and are regarded). For Leclerc, laughter represents the simplest and most powerful of revolutionary strategies:

Therefore I say (nothing will stop me): man's value has no value. My best proof: the laughter that takes hold of me when I observe him in those very areas where he wishes to be distinguished. And that is also my best weapon.

One must not wage war on man. That is his way of attaining value. Deny in order to affirm. Kill to love. One must simply deflate his values with the needle of ridicule.

—Leclerc [1974] 1981: 79

Hélène Cixous takes up the mantle of defiant, self-affirming laughter in her essay "Laugh of the Medusa" ("Le rire de la Méduse"), pressing the call for women to write their own fullness of experience. Cixous emphasizes a radically grounded force by invoking the image of the Medusa, the mythic female who strikes fatal fear in the hearts of men, perhaps for embodying a vision of liberated woman from which they have historically been quick to avert their gazes: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" ([1976] 1981: 255).

The canny and fearless wielding of laughter to cut against the grain of oppression has been well documented in, for example, feminist (Isaak 1996) and African American (Carpio 2008) contexts. As a salient illustration, Jo Anna

Isaak alludes to a Dutch film, titled *A Question of Silence* (*De stille rond Christine M.*, dir. Marleen Gorris 1982), in which three women, who did not previously know one another, beat a shopkeeper to death in a crescendo of unspoken rage while several other women in the shop look on in silence and then disperse. The court-appointed psychiatrist initially finds herself at a loss to explain the behavior. She becomes frustrated that one of the suspects, Christine M. (of the Dutch title), refuses to talk, until she realizes that the woman had stopped talking well before the event in question because she no longer saw the point in it. At the end of the film, having been condescended to by the prosecutor and the judge, Christine and the others begin to laugh:

Their laughter “breaks up” the courtroom and, by extension, the law. It is infectious, spreading to other women in the courtroom and then out into the film audience. The women file out of the courtroom laughing and, in turn, the women in the movie theater leave laughing. This is an example of the revolutionary power of women’s laughter.

—Isaak 1996: 14

Isaak locates this laughter in a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque capacity to vaporize the constraints of authority in an uninhibited celebration of the body and all it does, invoking the writings of Barthes and Kristeva for “laughter as libidinous licence” (1996: 15). In this light, laughter does not function as an individual response or even a social reaction in the way we commonly treat it. This “popular laughter” represents a different way of seeing the world, a folkloric clarity freed of the respectful distance imposed by dominant narratives. It is a sudden, down-to-earth revelation of life as it is, bracing amusement in seeing through culture’s self-preserving strictures (Bakhtin 1981).

TWENTIETH-CENTURY LAUGHTERS

The genre of comedy—such that we can ever really talk about it in transcultural, ahistorical terms—carried into the modern age an inner struggle between its predilection for disruption and unruliness in soliciting laughter and its “civilizing” urges toward rehabilitation and social unity. Literary critic T.G.A. Nelson proposes that these respective valences push against one another, and that “there is a potential for conflict between the subversiveness of comic action and dialog, full of pratfalls, insults, ridicule, defiance, and irreverence, and the steady movement towards harmony in the comic plot” (1990: 2). This conflict is not unrelated to the ideological tension between raucous laughter and its more thoughtful guise. Indeed, a sole or primary aim of making people laugh has long met with criticism as an unworthy if not downright disreputable aim.

In establishing his concept of the “vaudeville aesthetic” in early twentieth-century American popular performance, Henry Jenkins revisits the so-called “new humor,” which operated under an affect-driven, laughter-first directive, with no strings attached for continuity, theme, or, indeed, social decorum. Vaudeville and music hall came to jettison any pretense of plot to supply a full-length series of turns with no other aim than a serial stimulation of pleasure and affect. New humor went for the bodied strike by any means necessary, picking off targets high and low—to the disapproval of critics and commentators for whom comedy should never give in to base solicitation. For them, comedy’s saving grace was its social remit, its laughter should embody thoughtful response to situation and character, representing the honorable side of a battle for the soul of early twentieth-century mainstream comedy: “For one, the outward display of emotion is to be distrusted, laughter is to be restrained; for the other, outward affective response is a measure of success in a craft that ruthlessly exploited any and all means of producing a laugh” (Jenkins 1992: 32). Rick DesRochers prefaces a study of the broader period from the 1880s into the 1920s with an overview that goes to the heart of the matter:

The rowdiness in a vaudeville house should have been discouraged, according to reformers and critics, because it incited spectators to shun polite and disciplined appreciation for the performing arts. It also stimulated the violent outbursts and crude behaviors that had characterized nineteenth-century popular entertainments. The new humor in particular was found to offend so-called sophisticated artistic sensibilities.

—2014: xv

DesRochers argues that a certain anti-immigrant sentiment against southern and eastern European arrivals in the United States as inferior to those of British and northern European stock could be seen, at least in part, in the base and therefore undesirable magnitude and nature of the laughter courted by new humor and its immodest, disruptive laughter. In any case, vaudeville-aesthetic and laughter-first agendas can be seen to persist into the present, especially in the age of the virtual public square, with so many viewers and consumers there for the hailing (Garin 2015; Weitz 2017), and so much daily stress from which to seek escape.

Michael North (2009) adds a proposition about laughter in the early twentieth century in tracing how comedy jumped on board the machine-age transformation of society by embracing its technological capacities, its perfect reproducibility and repeatability. He points out Henri Bergson’s well-known reference to “something mechanical encrusted on the living” ([1900] 1980: 84) not only as a spur to laughter, but as an element of laughter itself. North revises Bergson’s contention, “Laughter is simply the result of a mechanism set up in

us by nature” (Bergson [1900] 1980: 188)—human technology perhaps finally having caught up to the workings of the body.

North goes so far as to declare that the capacity for repetition and reproduction brought about by the machine age led to a new kind of laughter, that “there turned out to be a very particular kind of amusement, one not generally available before the twentieth century, in going back to see the same pratfall, which seemed in some cases to be all the funnier now that it was no longer a surprise” (2009: 5). In this vein, Chaplin began to refit stock comic patterns for cinematic production (and reproduction), “[t]hus the machine age seems to have brought, along with all its other dislocations, a new motive for laughter and perhaps a new form of comedy” (2009: 5). Think at the other end of the century of Max Headroom, the computer-generated TV host from the 1980s. His juddering, electronically prankish and glitch-ridden laugh emphasizes a machine-like quality to the embodied act itself, in its surging repetition of sound and physicality.

An important renegotiation of the popular performance contract took place around the turn of the twentieth century with advances of commercially aimed recording technologies. The performer whose act was based on audience laughter and who therefore counted on the open channel with spectators found that connection at least partially suspended, even if recording took place in front of a studio audience. Jacob Smith considers the popularity of laughing songs, records, and stories in the early days of recorded entertainment: “The laugh emerged as an expression that was particularly able to represent a sense of immediacy when mechanically reproduced for audiences that studio performers would never see” (2008: 16). The *Okeh Laughing Record* (1922) begins with a mournful trumpet solo, appearing to establish the performance as seriously framed aesthetic endeavor. About fifteen seconds into the piece, a woman starts laughing, and spurred by periodic fluffs in the playing shows no signs of calming down. Eventually, the musician begins laughing also, and for the rest of the record’s nearly three minutes attempts to continue the musical piece falter and feed reinvigorated laughing jags from the woman and man.

As Smith suggests, the floundering highbrow performance breaking down into laughter evokes what twentieth-century sociologist Erving Goffman calls “flooding out” (Goffman [1974] 1986: 349). Goffman sees laughter as a common response by someone who, among other things, finds themselves unable to enjoin or sustain a behavioral framing appropriate to the social context at hand (in this case, a concert setting with its expectations of high performative competence on one side and sober audience attention on the other). The woman’s runaway laughter throws the nature of the event into question while bringing the performance palpably down to earth: “The woman’s flooding out precipitates the listener’s frame reorganization: the listener has lost a certain formal connection with the performer but has gained a relationship

to the laughing audience member, who has broached the ritual constraints of the situation” (Smith 2008: 20).

A correlative situation rendered through another representational palette, stands to “mean” something similar and different: a cartoon from *The New Yorker* magazine in 1996 depicts a gathering at a funeral, with covered mound (obviously the deceased), and a gathering of mourners, all of them laughing, including the presiding clergyman and the two gravediggers waiting off to the side. The caption reads “But, seriously . . .,” at face value a conversational switching cue, but secondarily an evocation of a comedian’s catchphrase that tends to mean the opposite of what it says (“But seriously, folks!”). Whether you think the clergyman is trying to guide the ceremony back to a more appropriate track or whether you think he is just getting going (or, of course, some variation thereof), the airy efficiency of cartoonist John Jonik’s drawing style admits to a communal levity that exceeds the amount of convivial cheer considered appropriate for such an occasion. There may reside a social sense of naughtiness in the behavior, but it alludes to a psycho-emotional principle found elsewhere by social scientists: the inclination toward laughter in the wake of bereavement as beneficial individually and socially (Keltner and Bonanno 1997).

LAUGHTER AND PERFORMANCE

In the modern age, laughter’s implication with the extended family of comedy and the comic appears taken for granted, as suggested by Matthew Bevis’s hypothesis, “study of the comic involves a consideration of ‘that which is laughable’ (with the provisos that the ‘laughable’ may or may not lead to laughter, and that, if it does, this laughter can be hard to gauge)” (2013: 4). Philosopher Susanne K. Langer offers a characterization of comedy that sidesteps reduction to defining elements (i.e., humor, *per se*, and happy endings) in favor of its underlying “life-feeling,” which may not equate precisely with laughter but surely recognizes its embodiments of joy and social cohesion (1953: 120, 123).

Conventional theater therefore provides a handy model for an examination of laughter, offering the “control” of a largely consistent performance text night after night for an ever-changing “sample” (i.e., unique collection of spectators), the important part being that it bases itself on a live transaction in many crucial senses of the word. It represents an exponential expansion upon a joke amongst friends, thereby incorporating mutually entailing intentionalities and their face-to-face negotiation in settings that court laughter, as well as the social dynamics of present bodies subject to the same joke stream. In the mid-twentieth century, British-born American theater scholar and critic Eric Bentley reflected in *The Life of the Drama* (1964) upon something of that interlacing in

a way that productively holds humor and laughter in the same analytical grasp. As part of a chapter on farce, he recommends that in studying the act of laughter we avoid limiting our attention to the bodied burst alone:

The student of laughter should study the whole curve of which the burst of noise is but the final inch. Before people will burst out laughing they have to be prepared to burst out laughing. The only sure preparation is a particular state of expectation and sensitivity that amounts to a kind of euphoria. It can be more important than the joke itself.

—Bentley 1964: 234

Bentley goes on to consider the dramatic form that predicates itself on laughter—namely, farce, as “joking turned theatrical” (1964: 234)—by way of acknowledging the broader affective shapes of a performance that gives way to any given upsurge of amusement. Researchers trying to find methodological footholds in studies of audience laughter have identified at least three components: latency, as the time between the punch line of a joke and the onset of laughter; the total duration of an audience laugh; and amplitude, the point of a laugh’s highest intensity (Pollio et al. 1972: 216).

What could pass for a nightly experiment was carried out in 1994 by the British theater company known then as Théâtre de Complicité (and now simply as Complicité) at the beginning of a production titled *Out of a house walked a man . . .* in London’s Lyttleton Theatre. The theater piece attempted to render theatrically something of the oeuvre of Daniil Kharm’s (1905–42), a Russian writer ahead of what might now be called the postmodern tradition. Complicité had acquired a reputation for its depiction of darkly comic worlds based in a highly imaginative, physical theater. Dwarfed by a dark, looming space, a man at a desk, dressed in a dark suit and hat, sat motionless as the performance began, with head bowed for several seconds, then looked up. A second man, dressed the same, walked to the front of the stage and stood alertly looking out toward the audience. At some point laughter would emerge from one or more spectators, grow, extend, build, ebb and renew as the actor located each new source of laughter with his gaze. At some optimum moment the sitting man would address the audience: “I am testing my theory of humor. If you want the auditorium to laugh, come out on to the stage and stand there in silence until someone bursts out laughing.” The spoken words represent the totality of one of Kharm’s texts (Kharm’s 1993).

The moment exemplifies how the ineffability of the live transaction resists empirical breakdown, let alone measurement and analysis. One can hypothesize a number of factors likely contributing to the dialog between silent performer and any given spectator interlaced also with the social dynamics amongst the body of bodies we call an audience: initial discomfort, unsureness or

embarrassment as to what the theater frame invites/demands/etc.; the emerging clown-like physicality of the silent performer, itself a prompt for laughter; relief and a growing instinct to join with other laughers (or, indeed, in some cases to resist the social call); a non-Duchenne broadcast related to a sense of one's own cultural sophistication; and, of course, an unknowable mixture of ingredients, along with the likelihood that there were spectators who did not so much as crack a smile. No doubt there were potentially wide variations in the above performance text from night to night. The text itself seems to set up a joke at the expense of theoretical endeavor if not scientific inquiry.

In their overview of laughter research, Trouvain and Truong (2017) note some of the complicating factors attending empirical laughter studies, not the least of which is the variety of potential for other than humorous stimuli, including nervousness, surprise, and aggression. They also indicate the estimable challenge of engineering laboratory-grade rigor for social interaction in which the so-called observer's paradox comes with augmented implications for a psycho-social dynamic radically beholden to on-the-ground context. The above moment in performance history thereby fashioned a compelling exercise for the inspection of laughter-related threads while winking its cynicism that such a critical approach could bear meaningful fruit.

PERFORMED LAUGHTER

Laughter in any text carries the facility to illuminate facets of human experience over and above the mere reference to or replication of a recognizable human behavior. Manfred Pfister contends that "representations of laughter reveal the faultlines of the anxieties and the social pressures at work at a given historical moment more distinctly than actual laughter does. After all, they do not only 'represent' the laughter of a particular society, but at the same time give a pointed and pregnant shape to it, analyse and frequently problematise it" (2002: vii). Pfister's observation leads to any number of case studies, from the literary, visual, and performing arts, some of which we have already sampled. It becomes clear that laughter in a text always carries meanings, purposefully and otherwise, well in excess of its face (or body) value. Further significance can be plumbed in the manner and context of its rendering, as well as the broader meanings to be found in the significative systems of genre.

Simulation

Authentic laughter does seem to bypass our articulators in a way that is difficult to replicate consciously, which would suggest that the effort required to simulate "genuine" laughter is what gives it away. One actor who had the knack for it was Stan Laurel, and you can see his laughing chops in at least two clips: *Way Out West*

(dir. James W. Horne 1937), in which he is inadvertently tickled by a crooked sheriff's wife trying to wrestle from him the deed to a goldmine; and *Blotto* (dir. James Parrott 1930) in which the impetus is his self-amusement at thinking he has doubly duped his wife. In this latter, "lost" film, Laurel manages not only to activate all the appropriate muscles but to embody that extra step of actually trying to stop because it hurts. Kozintsev, who outlines the biological mechanics of laughter (2012: 184), notes three of its "inherent features": "spontaneity and lack of voluntary control," its "collective nature and, as a result, its contagiousness," and "its playful antagonism to speech, thinking, culturally motivated action, and culture itself" (2012: 115–16). Laurel is seated at a restaurant table with his constant chum, Oliver Hardy, and the two appear woozily inebriated. Laurel, musing privately, inches his way into full-blown laughter, which includes fully realistic components of breathless shrieking and an inability to remain properly upright in his chair, exemplifying the first of Kozintsev's elements. He tries repeatedly to say something to Hardy and is unable to get the words out; eventually Hardy succumbs and the two become conjoined in debilitating hilarity at their own cheekiness, thereby embodying the other two "inherent features". Hardy notices that Laurel's wife is sitting nearby, glaring at them, and points out what should be a sobering development to his friend. The sight of her redoubles Laurel's laughter, the two men exchange hysterically impaired exhortations ("You tell her," "No, you tell her"), then Laurel manages to say to her, "We drank your liquor," as he plops the empty bottle on the table, all the while racked with triumphal mirth. In a final reversal—on the audience as well as the duo—Laurel's wife has the last laugh: "That wasn't liquor, that was cold tea!" The two laughers are stopped dead in the glare of their comeuppance with the suddenness of a flicked light switch, thereby emphasizing the extent to which the actors had been in control throughout their seemingly uncontrollable responses. Meanwhile, this chastening reversal carries the clown's perennial warning against becoming overly pleased with oneself, a comic admonition against everyday hubris.

Defamiliarization

Harpo Marx embodies both tribute and critique by virtue of his irrepressible and voiceless screen persona, often seen in films outlining the visual element of laughter with a starkly absent audio. One routine in *Duck Soup* (dir. Leo McCarey 1933) has him talking on the telephone, an unlikely mode of communication for someone who does not speak. Harpo wears around his waist a tool belt equipped with several (now old-fashioned) car horns for which one squeezes a black rubber bulb to produce the sound. He approximates a few recognizable vocal utterances before being moved to laughter: a series of squeezes on one of his horns approximate the stock descending notes of a cartoon laugh while his eyes close, his mouth opens, and his shoulders bounce

along in rhythm. Harpo separates the physical and vocal elements of laughter to re-present them in exaggerated, disfigured fashion, thereby calling attention to them individually while teasing the (spectator's) perceiving body with the incongruity of the whole.

Dark and Darker

Jaak Panksepp has identified "dark laughter" as arising from aggression and cruelty and taking the form of mocking, derision, or bullying, possibly attempting to bond with some participants through exclusion of others (2000: 185). Joe Pesci's character in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) gives a masterclass in power and control through laughter in the well-known "Do you think I'm funny" scene. He dominates a gathering of mobsters in a restaurant, with respect paid in laughter; at will he shuts off the laughter, for his own entertainment, whereupon the laughter returns more pugnaciously and herd-like, accompanying his thrashing of a restaurant employee. While Pesci produces the occasional splash of laughter to regulate the mood, Ray Liotta's laugh is propulsive and serrated, his face a grotesque mask of stricken mouth and eyes, periodically looking around to monitor the other pack animals desperate to survive. Liotta's performance, in fact, pins in the air just that dual-action capacity for laughter, throwing into living relief an equal and opposite pull between ascendancy and submission.

If the above performance illustrates the darker operations of laughter in a realistically rendered social context, the following transposes human interaction to a more garish representational register. In an overtly cartoonish rendering of the hair-trigger gangland context, Heath Ledger's Joker, taunting nemesis to Batman in *The Dark Knight* (dir. Christopher Nolan 2008), generates a psychopath's toolkit of laughs, none as initially unsettling as his entrance upon an underground gathering of Gotham City's crème de la scum. A succession of disembodied, staccato ha's and ho's only gradually come into aural focus as laughter, a sarcastic travesty of the usual bursting response prior to his entrance line, "And I thought my jokes were bad." Elsewhere in the film, Ledger's laughter ranges from low-level gurgle to Grand Guignol paroxysm, and includes scenes in which his laughter appears fueled by life-threatening danger and brutal physical attack.

Caricature

A vocally and physically extravagant response, laughter is itself easy prey for ridicule, especially because of the implications for character. We have all heard bizarre and startling laughs in real life (though none of us have them). As Basil's simultaneously long-suffering and unfazed wife Sybil on *Fawlty Towers* (1975, 1979), Prunella Scales has a detachable two-part laugh, sometimes only making

noise on the intake, rather than the exhalation, and somehow reminiscent of a wheezing donkey or small air horn. The other part involves a feathery run of “ha’s” all on one note. Periodically she parts with a trumpet-like burst of “Ha!”, with attendant bodied convulsion—sometimes enhanced by inebriation—trading on an abject break of decorum as the lady of the manor.

Sybil’s laugh appears markedly unselfconscious, allowing us to view her husband’s timeworn irritation, which he may suffer privately from an adjacent room or have occasion to share with onlookers (“Please don’t alarm yourself, it’s only my wife laughing”). This behavioral spectacle is truly a performative achievement by Scales, in its sampling of laugh types gathered to a single character and capable of distinctive, gaudy variation. The laugh as caricature is *lazzo*-like (such that Sybil could be seen as a contemporary *commedia dell’arte* mask) in drawing a universal comic charge from class, gender, social, and geocultural power sources.

Salvation

In Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941), John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea) is a disaffected Hollywood director yearning to make a film more socially conscientious than the popular comedies he is so good at turning out. His earnestly undertaken odyssey to experience the life of the downtrodden leads by twists, turns, and unfortunate happenstance to confinement in a labor camp. In the iconic, climactic scene, he and the other inmates are taken to a nearby church, courtesy of its welcoming African American congregation, to watch a Disney cartoon (*Playful Pluto*, dir. Burt Gillett 1934). He observes there the child-like joy and communal surrender to laughter of the convicts and churchgoers, finally giving into it himself and undergoing an epiphany. At the end of the film, he decides that it is more important to continue making comedies than to pursue some higher ideal of aesthetic fulfillment through social realism: “There’s a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that’s all some people have? It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan.” *Sullivan’s Travels* ends with a brief, kaleidoscopic montage of faces lit beatifically by laughter, the variety and accumulation of which suggesting a world of common people, inferring a further zooming out to include ourselves the viewers.

LAUGHTER AND DIGITAL CULTURE

If we are to take the liberty of asking the follow-on question to Parvulescu’s rhetorical query, “How did the twentieth century laugh?” (2010: 5), namely, “How did the twenty-first century laugh?”, the attempt to answer would have to account for the rise of the virtual body, its digital mediation and its redefined social fabric.

Developments in technology at the tail end of the twentieth century surely brought about a new mutation of laughter with the onset of the digital age. The issue bears expanded reflection, not to mention further study, in the wake of individual spectatorship-on-demand via video cassette, DVD, and then the online likes of YouTube. To what extent, then, can we be seen to be laughing at the same thing the first time a given comic bit strikes us on film, television, or internet video, as opposed to any of the “subsequent performances,” a theater-related conceit introduced by Jonathan Miller (1986) with new twists and turns in the era of Web 2.0 interactivity? What, for example, takes the place of surprise in the laughter response when we replay or revisit a favorite comic moment or even as we think of it as we lovingly relive it with a fellow fan—or, indeed, as we view a barrage of favorite moments in mash-up? How is the internal composition of a laugh affected, now that vintage performances can be found in online archives and a capacity for collecting and editing lie within reach of many an internet frequenter (Weitz 2017)?

The migration of social interaction to online and other digitized spaces (i.e., mobile phones and tablets) has seen a move from live, face-to-face transactions to writing/reading keyboard-based communication in geographically dispersed locations and decoupled time continuums. Laughter as the call or response of a social transaction is “an audiovisual event” (Petridis et al. 2013: 187), and even this description fails to account for the mutually palpable element in first-order interaction. In virtual dialog, there is no first-hand access to voice, body, and gesture, through which an embedded trunk line of communication takes place, validating, supporting, amending, or countering the linguistic information stream. The pragmatics of digital corresponding has placed a burden upon the signifying capacities of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks in a way that was not demanded of legacy exchanges between letter writers, who might report Duchenne-level amusement without necessarily trying to represent it orthographically, or to note explicitly that the preceding or following statement was not meant to be taken seriously.

It is by now clear that the so-called “laughing animal” is determined to remain so even in its migration to social spaces that prevent direct bodied interaction and remain mediated at every discursive turn by screens and keyboards. With transactional exchanges flying around social media in what we have come to call “real time”—and despite the interceding necessities of writing and reading amongst any given digitally driven conversation—our laughter-related impulses seem to retain a communicative insistence despite the phenomenological distance between any laugh particle and the point at which we press “Send.” We cannot help but put our laughs on record, their scale or texture. Unlaughter—the palpable refusal of a humor bid considered offensive or grossly inappropriate (Billig 2010)—also finds expression online. And, in the era of online interaction and potential global exposure, spectatorship expands outwards to include people one will never know

in the concentric bands of spectatorship between the poster or subject of an utterance and the farthest reaches of a global audience (Weitz 2017). Such distance can foster a dehumanizing stance that leads to the enabling of cruel or hostile laughter, one of the harsher eventualities of the wild, virtual social space.

Well before the age of digital culture, anthropologist Mary Douglas emphasized the indispensable role played by the body as part of verbal communication, which for our purposes would surely include non-Duchenne laughter as indicator of joking intent ([1975] 1999). As e-legend has it, Scott E. Fahlman devised a keyboard expression in 1982, in the wake of so many uncomfortably crossed wires in an online bulletin board. Hence colon, hyphen, close parenthesis—the likes of which we now call an emoticon—came to offer a sideways smiley face as a way of marking the joking intention that would otherwise be conveyed through facial expression, gesture, or tone of voice.

In Douglas's words, "Laughter is a unique bodily eruption which is always taken to be a communication" ([1975] 1999: 166–7), and we often cannot resist putting that response on record by way of completing the transactional circuit. A range of expression has been generated through keyboard representation in laughter syllables (like "ha ha," and which can vary according to language and culture); internet abbreviations (e.g., "lol" and "lmao"); emoticons (as above); and "asides" or "stage directions," usually enclosed by asterisks (e.g., *busts a gut*, *pisses self laughing*, or *groans*). Emoji collections tend to include an array of laughter-related symbols that can acquire further resonance through serial and/or multiple deployment. Gifs, short loops of video or animated action, often quoted from popular film and television texts, also include a variety of laughter stand-ins among a host of other themes (see, for example, Giphy, <https://giphy.com/search/laughter>). This strip of embodied laughter can be adopted as both registering of response and return laughter bid; the cited laugh often isolates a pointed emotional stance and its importation from a popular cultural context carries its own incongruous spark. Non-Duchenne utterances are equally evident, notably in the form of "lol," winking emojis, and e-laughter particles like "heh." Researchers have, for example, seen laughter syllables, conventionalized acronyms, emoticons, and emojis positioned in WhatsApp messaging conversations to advance and buffer potentially delicate negotiations on whether to change the subject in ways similar to face-to-face interaction (Petitjean and Morel 2017). On the other hand, Delia Chiaro notes the practice of a YouTube vlogger like Alonzo Lerone, who posts videos of his captured laughter in response to various objects of his amusement (Chiaro 2018: 124).

IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

From how many angles and through how many theoretical lenses can a laugh be observed in the wild of day-to-day human interaction, and in what plenitude

of social circumstances from inside, outside, and overhead? What happens differently in thrall to conventionalized sociocultural contracts, like theater and comedy clubs, cinemas, political rallies, and after-dinner speeches? As suggested above, the internet and social media have generated a whole new kind of social configuration with variations on the prototypical exchange owing to the sense of lone togetherness of online relationships and communities.

Joining centuries of philosophical thought on the subject, experimental and data-driven research in the social and natural sciences contributes to something like an aerial view of a central urban train yard, with individual tracks running in parallel, crossing and diverging to create designs of impressive industry and little enveloping pattern. This essay has sought to convey an impression of how the rise of laughter-related research over the past few generations has lent emphasis to its diversity of perspectives—which appear to crystallize laughter’s breadth and complexity rather than pointing the way to any unifying theory.

The best we can hope for, perhaps, is the holistic picture rendered by a diversified approach to the study of laughter featured in this essay, each route supplying enlightenment unavailable to the others: empirical study in its ever more sophisticated capacities to zero in on human (inter)action; philosophical and literary insights as a sort of ongoing tradition of practice as research, of imagination turned inward upon one of our more elusive everyday experiences, at once ephemeral and carnal; and the interrogative capacity of laughter as an affect-bearing sign, a quick probe for all manner of meaning upon any given reader or spectator.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ethics

MICHAEL PICKERING

INTRODUCTION

The focal concern of this chapter is to negotiate the fraught relationship between comedy and ethics. There are various reasons why the relationship has been regarded as fraught, and they will be discussed throughout the chapter, but I want to start by referring to just one of them for the simple reason that it may seem to constitute a major, if not insuperable, obstacle standing in the way of this concern. The obstacle in question is the widespread assumption that ethics and comedy are contradictory to each other, and so do not have or could not have a relationship whereby any viable dialog between them can occur. For those who hold to this, to claim and then discuss an ethical dimension to comedy is necessarily to embark on a fool's errand.

I embark on this errand because I do not share in the assumption of no viable dialog and hope to offer a qualified refutation of it. Underpinning what I have to say is the contention that the ethical dimension of any communicative transaction, whether situated or mediated, proximate or distant, is intrinsic to it and for that reason unavoidable. Comedy is of course a communicative transaction with its own distinctive features, but these do not exempt it from this condition, nor is its ethical dimension exceptional. Though I shall concentrate on the more controversial aspects of this dimension in what follows, moral and ethical issues are not confined to the consequences of severe breaches of social convention or etiquette. They are an inevitable component of everyday interaction and exchange, and that necessarily includes such phenomena as comedy and the joking relationship.¹

In fostering dialog between apparently alien discourses, folly appears confirmed as we enter immediately into hazardous terrain. Discussing the ethics

of humor and comedy is in many respects not at all straightforward. One difficulty arises from the intrinsic ambivalence and polysemy of comic discourse and performance, making it a matter of sometimes delicate negotiation as to what is semantically intended, or in the case of impersonation, what is involved in the switchover from personal identity to comedic persona. Another example of why such discussion can be particularly tricky occurs when we broach the issue as to where we should strike a balance between civil liberties involving freedom of speech and uses of that freedom to express hatred or espouse violence to certain social groups. In the name of ethics, we have necessarily to fulfill various social and moral obligations to each other, and in facilitating this good they need to be nurtured in the name of tolerance. How then do we respond when these obligations are torn apart, and manifest intolerance stares us in the face?

To those who regard ethics and comedy as diametrically opposed, considering the ethical dimension of comedy may seem trivial, misguided, or simply not worth the effort. Surely comedy is just about having a good laugh, while ethics is about abstruse aspects of human conduct only discussed in elite circles and institutions? To the contrary, ethics is concerned with issues that are central to how we conduct ourselves in life according to certain frameworks and principles that guide the choices we make and the actions we take. These issues extend across all social relations and institutions and include how people are represented and assessed, along with the values or value claims implicated in this, and any ensuing endorsement of or damage to their social identities and recognition in the eyes of others. In light of this, one immediate response to the contention that ethics has no bearing on humor and comedy is to ask if, in having a good laugh, you are laughing *at* someone else or laughing *with* someone else, for the question opens up a considerable bundle of ethical issues which are far from arcane or recondite. We do of course need to distinguish in general terms between varying scales among such issues. It hardly needs to be said that this dimension of comedy is not as heavily loaded with ethical implications as those ensuing from intentionally lying under oath in a court of law, or in deliberately making a series of false statements in a political campaign of huge national significance, but, despite such distinctions, the ethical dimension of humor and comedy is far from trivial. It should be taken seriously, seriously discussed, and regarded in the long term as an abiding issue for serious reflection. In thinking this way, as I hope to show, we are far from tilting at windmills.

As well as the accusations of misguidedness and triviality, various other obstacles and objections seem to stand in the way of this task. In setting up this chapter, it is important to discuss at least three of them. First, compared with other forms of popular culture, comedy has long been considered too lightweight to be worth serious attention. There are, for example, fewer critical studies of film comedy than of other film genres such as documentary, film noir, or classic

Hollywood. Indeed, it is only fairly recently, over the past thirty years or so, that popular comedy has gradually become an object of study in academic fields like cultural and media studies, cultural history, and the sociology of culture. The present volume is one more step on the road to overcoming this relative neglect, and each such step is important precisely because, throughout the whole modern period, mediated popular culture has become increasingly pervasive, its multiple personae, genres, and discourses woven in various ways into day-to-day life. We may at different times be simply accepting or severely critical of certain aspects of popular culture, but we cannot deny that we are influenced by popular culture all of the time, that we are in varying degrees reliant on it for the resources it provides in making sense and meaning of our experiences and what happens in the world, or that we draw upon elements of popular culture—sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely—in maintaining and modifying our identities and subjectivities. Comedy has been central to popular culture throughout the modern period and for that reason, as well as those just mentioned, its many features need to be seriously considered and assessed.

A second apparent stumbling block is the claim that critical assessment and analysis are antithetical to popular comedy and destructive of its pleasures, delectations, and delights. The usual analogy is to the dissection of a frog: you may learn much about it by doing this, but you wind up with a dead frog. The view implicit in this assumption (apart from its false comparison of physiological and cultural analysis) is that attending carefully to what makes a joke work, or scrutinizing the performative skills of certain club comedians, fails to engage with the joyousness of joking or shows no appreciation of how such skills are integral to the immersive on-the-spot appeal of the stand-up act. More often than not, it is a self-serving assumption, and on suitable occasions is used to support a long-abiding stereotype of the university don as a dour, humorless killjoy.

The third reason for rejecting discussion of any relationship between comedy and ethics is the widely held belief that humor and comedy transgress ethical principles and values, and so by their very nature are non-serious or have an inalienable license to escape being serious, with ethics taken to be the essence of seriousness and for that reason considered as diametrically counter to all that humor and comedy are about. For those who hold this belief, to introduce ethics into any consideration of comedy is at best misguided and at worst evidence of the baleful influence of that late-modern sin: political correctness. Anxiety or fear over the prevalence of this belief may, at least in part, explain why, of all the diverse features of humor and comedy, their ethical issues and implications are among the most neglected, or the least to be given concerted treatment, in the limited academic literature devoted to them. In response to this, it should nevertheless be difficult—if not impossible—to explain the prevalence of this belief when confronted with forms of humor and comedy

that are demonstrably racist, sexist, classist, disabilist, homophobic, or directly abusive and offensive in other ways. For many, such forms of humor and comedy are ethically unacceptable. Some people are unafraid of saying so, yet because there is such a huge gulf between holding this belief and regarding such forms as unacceptable, in everyday conversation any one across a range of intermediate positions may be taken, for whatever pragmatic or principled reason. So, for example, registering offense may seem difficult to square with feeling ambivalent about being serious about that which subverts seriousness, while in another context we may worry that in being serious about what seems to us unacceptable, we could inadvertently make ourselves into a sitting duck of a joke.

Such difficulties acknowledged, it remains the case that bringing ethics into any consideration of popular comedy often leads to a radical polarization of opinion. The purpose of this chapter is to oppose such polarization, but before developing my argument against it, I want to make a few general points, the first of which is concerned with the relationship between seriousness and comic discourse, and the dogma of their unrelatedness. It is this dogma that underlies the belief already referred to that bringing ethics and comedy together is intellectual folly simply because they are completely distinct from each other. Joking is of course a quite different mode of social interaction and communication to, say, an involved political discussion, or a convoluted conversation between intimates about the past-and-present quality of their relationship. It is vitally important that we retain such distinctions in any consideration we make of how joking fits into the general fabric of human exchange. If we do not do so, and allow them to blur or fade, we would soon descend into confusion and consternation as to the intention and meaning of what we say to each other in everyday social life. There is nevertheless no hard-and-fast line to be drawn between being humorous and being serious. For example, at times we are unsure if someone is joking or not. We may find it difficult to discern whether a remark is meant light-heartedly, in a temporary interval during an otherwise earnest conversation, or is intended as a covert dig, one hidden perhaps by a wry smile. Criticism may be concealed by a joke because—although this is always a claim that needs to be called into question and carefully qualified—in general terms we are not held responsible for what is said in jest to the same degree as we are when speaking in avowed seriousness. For this very reason, we may be “induced to risk messages that might be unacceptable if stated seriously” (Emerson 1969: 170), and the key issue then is whether transposition from one discursive frame to another is allowed by our interlocutor(s), and if so, with what consequences. How the distinction between what is acceptable and unacceptable is negotiated is usually exchange-specific, and so dependent on the situation at hand and the social and cultural relations involved. When the transposition is allowed, what may happen is that a topic introduced through

humor emerges into open view as “one person makes a joke and the second person, acknowledging that the first person intended a joke, responds with a serious comment on the content of the joke as though the first person had spoken seriously” (Emerson 1969: 170). This example clearly shows that the line between comic and serious content in everyday conversation can be crossed and re-crossed. They are not hermetically sealed off from each other. It also illustrates how movements between different modes of interaction occur and are negotiated. The joking frame can slide and for a while overlap with the communicative frames of serious exchange. It is because of this that, at times, we experience the paradoxical perception whereby we accept the intention to joke at face value while also taking from it a meta-message of serious import. Astute comedians recognize this and build it into their various routines.

There are further objections to regarding serious and comic discourse as binary opposites, and they derive from conceiving of comedy as forms of play. Play is conventionally understood as utterly distinct from seriousness and being serious, but approaching play in that way does not identify what is specific to it. In playing, instrumental rationality and the seriousness of purposes are suspended, and in the space thus created, play acquires its own non-purposive purpose. That is why Johann Huizinga, in a seminal text on play theory written in the 1930s, claimed that “seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness” (Huizinga 1970: 65). An important example of this is when humor is used to alleviate hostility or aggression because of drawing upon its characteristic playfulness; it is this that takes the heat out of the situation. As the American psychologist Bernard Saper noted: “While it is true that defamatory ethnic or racial humor can serve to add fuel to antagonistic beliefs or feelings, it is also true that it can serve to defuse or soften such antagonism” (1991: 45), as for instance when Jewish jokes play with anti-Semitic stereotypes in order to subvert their hostility and make it less threatening.² The key point in this is that seeing play as simply the opposite of seriousness is inadequate precisely because play can exceed such dualisms. Of course, as already acknowledged, we do not think in this way when we are caught up in the playfulness of comic discourse or are overtaken by the funniness of a certain situation. Hans-Georg Gadamer put it this way: “The player knows very well what play is, and that what he is doing is ‘only a game’; but he does not know what exactly he ‘knows’ in knowing that” (1989: 102). Writing in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Robert Williams makes a related point in saying that “we are acculturated to the games of comedy but know or care little about them” (1988: 17). Thinking about them means taking them seriously, but we cannot do this without appreciating the aesthetics involved in humor and comedy. Play is central to such aesthetics in realizing its peculiar interchange between order and disorder, opposition and union, tension and resolution, as for example in a long stand-up routine where we are kept guessing as to its

denouement. This interchange is often realized in the reversal of expectation or modification of perspective that is integral to a great deal of joke-telling as we move from one semantic frame to another, or one meaning of a word to another: "So I was getting into my car, and this guy came up and asked me: 'Can you give me a lift?' I said: 'Sure, you look great, the world's your oyster, go for it'."

In this straightforward play on a single word, which is so often the case with Tommy Cooper jokes, there is an abrupt turnaround of the anticipated meaning involving a charitable act of transportation, with this resolving itself into an emphatic statement of heartening encouragement. In comic entertainment, from simple puns to shaggy-dog stories, our usual ways of doing and seeing, thinking and acting, are momentarily upended and reconceived, in a period of leave from conventional meanings and associations. Jonathan Miller regards this aspect of humor as lying in its "rehearsal of alternative categories and classifications of the world in which we find ourselves" (1988: 10), the value of this being that it prevents us becoming slaves of the categories we usually abide by. While we depend on these categories in the regular conduct of our everyday lives, humor and comedy allow us to stand aside from them for a short while and so "restore us to the more versatile versions of ourselves" (Miller 1988: 10, 15–16). This versatility is enormously valuable for both personal and public reasons because a joke, however simple its linguistic form, "brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which is in some way hidden in the first," and this then affords us the "opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity . . . that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective" (Douglas 1979: 96). The occasional relativizing of our experience, our values, and our identities helps this versatility develop and be sustained.

For reasons such as this, an ethical position on humor and comedy is seriously weakened when it does not take into account the aesthetics of humor and comedy. The ethics and aesthetics of comedy have to be considered alongside each other for at least three interrelated reasons: first, in order to counteract the stubborn claim of their unrelatedness; second, to challenge any inflation of the aesthetic values of comedy by claiming that its imaginative projection or participation are insulated from real-life involvement; and third, to avoid any holier-than-thou pieties that fail to recognize, never mind appreciate, the value of fictive involvement and fanciful engagement, even to the point of relishing absurdity.

A further general point worth making at this juncture is that the ethics of humor and comedy is not concerned only with their symbolic and rhetorical content. That is obviously one side of the story, for in attending to comic texts and artefacts the codes and conventions, forms and practices of their representation and discourse are closely examined. The other side lies in

attention to the responses made to this content, and to the implications and consequences of these responses. Our responses embrace a broad range from passionate appreciation through critical assessment to abhorrent rejection. The ethics of humor and comedy is closely associated with this critical assessment, though again with the proviso that it does not proceed in isolation from developing an understanding of their aesthetic values. There are various ways in which such a critical assessment can be conducted, but to begin with a good step toward it is offered by the American literary critic and novelist Frank Lentricchia, who has defined the task of criticism as turning around the re-reading of culture “so as to amplify and strategically position the marginalized voices of the ruled, exploited, oppressed, and excluded” (1983: 15). This task extends to popular culture, and is directly applicable to jokes made at the expense of those who already belong to these specified social categories. Critical analysis and assessment can then show how such jokes sanction existing prejudices and rhetorically reinforce the marginalization of certain voices. This activity is ethical in itself because it makes the auditors of such jokes aware of their import, so that if they continue to laugh at them or their like, they do so in light of that knowledge.

Such ethical activity or reflexivity does not happen all the time. It tends to be occasional or periodic. Within any cultural grouping, some meanings and values are accepted as reasonable and others as unreasonable; some views and outlooks are viewed favorably and others unfavorably; some forms of expression and understanding are endorsed and others not. This is inevitable, but where critical assessment steps in, they may then be either further endorsed or opened up to question. It is precisely through such opening up that certain kinds of jokes or comic genres may come to be seen as offensive, or simply stale and outdated. A fairly recent example of this is the one-liner mother-in-law joke. Once a commonplace item in television comedy, its in-built misogyny gradually undermined its public acceptance, so that when Butlins (a British family holiday camp company) banned such jokes in 1998 as part of its campaign to improve its commercial reputation for moral respectability, the move seemed to set the seal on the demise of this particular comic genre (Coward 1998: 4). Today, while still available through various websites, mother-in-law jokes have little presence in television comedy and have pretty much faded away in vernacular forms of humor. Processes like this, turning around times of critical reassessment, lie behind the historical specificity of humor and comedy. Such reassessment occurs in everyday life—over a drink in a pub, or during a conversation on a country walk—just as much as in liberal journalism or academic books. It is at such moments of reassessment that our cultural affiliations and values are most consciously attended to, and possibly reformed or refreshed. We have then openly engaged with the ethical dimension of humor and comedy, and in doing so have seen how questioning is a crucial element of such engagement, involving

such processes as “learning to name things anew, to become alert to exclusions and to forgotten aspects . . . to overhear what is usually drowned out by the predominant values, to rethink what is ordinarily taken for granted” (Scott 1990: 7).

POLITICAL (IN)CORRECTNESS GONE MAD

Jokes that raise ethical concerns do so in different degrees according to where they are positioned on the spectrum from expressing casual, ill-judged prejudices to articulating hatred of others and espousing violence toward them, as for example in jokes on Ku Klux Klan affiliated websites (see Billig 2001, 2009). We have already seen that many jokes turn upon a shift in semantic expectation and so are reliant on an element of surprise, as in the classic lead-up to a punchline. There are similar gradations all the way from mild or commonplace surprise to making audiences catch their breath, aghast at what they hear. At the far end of this range, some comedians exploit their permitted joke-telling presence on stage by deliberately shocking their audiences. This is a tactic of varying severity associated with contemporary “edgy” comedy, but it is by no means confined to that. For example, one evening after telling a long Jewish-type joke at his club in Manchester, Bernard Manning declared that there would be no more such jokes that night because “I’ve just discovered that I lost my grandfather in Auschwitz.” With a grave face, and following a dramatic pause, he then added: “He fell out of the fuckin’ machine gun tower” (Margolis 1996: 2).

The joke hinged on a quite different shift of sense to that associated with lightbulb jokes or chicken-crossing-the-road two-liners. It turned instead on a switchback twist as a result of which those following the narration of the joke were suddenly hurtled from identification with one ethnic set of people to another. What the joke did was initially draw forth from the audience compassionate, perhaps deeply felt, yet in some ways—for lack of both experience and imagination—incomprehensible feelings related to the enormous sufferings of Jewish victims of the Shoah, and then abruptly ditch these by revealing that the nationality of his grandfather was that of their fascist oppressors. With one fell stroke this removed the ground from beneath their affective responses. The shock technique employed in this was nasty, brutish and, allowing for its faux-dramatic technique, relatively short. In cruelly upending the expectations Manning began by courting, with his serious mien and lowered voice, he diverted heartfelt feelings (or at least the deliberate awakening of these) into a quite different, utterly unsympathetic alleyway. By this means he turned playful surprise into duplicitous subterfuge. The transposition was at once ethnic and political: from Jewish camp inmate to German guard, and from anti-Nazism to antisemitism. The joke is a piece of

ethical chicanery beyond all redemption, yet Manning's biographer, Jonathan Margolis, finds the joke funny, and daring, because it "mocks convention, dissipates contemporary niceties and toys with clichéd emotions" (1996: 2). To the extent that it does this, it does so by mocking and thereby dissipating the widespread sorrow and sympathy associated with what happened to Jewish people in the most infamous of all the death camps. Such unalleviated sorrow and sympathy entail far more than "contemporary niceties" or "clichéd emotions." They are about the diverse feelings that now deeply pervade popular memory of the Holocaust, and if it was "daring" to subvert these in the name of humor or comic effect, we have surely to switch tracks and ask what there is aesthetically to extoll in this when its own complacent self-regard as a joke refuses to give any ground to the ethical implications of jokingly transforming his alleged family connection to the Holocaust from hapless victim to heartless guard.

Manning's dual comedic signature was to take nothing as taboo, and on the self-serving basis of that, to then target marginalized social groups, particularly Jewish people, homosexuals and women, the Irish, and all non-white ethnicities. Manning was perhaps the most notorious British comedian plying the exorbitant



FIGURE 8.1: Bernard Manning (1930–2007), British comedian. Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

stereotypicality of these groups, but he was far from alone either in this or in the vicious misogyny that coincided with the historical emergence of second-wave feminism. It was shared by many of those who appeared on ITV's 1970s clubland comedy program *The Comedians*. The stand-up comedy heard on the program was a diluted version of its clubland progenitor. Mike Reid was one such comedian playing the clubs and appearing on television. His repertoire contained many jokes demeaning women, identifying them only as sexual objects or house maids: "Have you heard the one about the self-lubricating pussy? My mate took it home and gave it to his wife, she said, what am I supposed to do with this? He said, teach it to cook and fuck off!" The question here is again quite simple: does the joking frame and the play aesthetic within that frame exonerate such jokes from wider social attitudes and assumptions about gender and sexuality? In the second quarter of the twentieth century, Denier Warren obviously thought so in using the blackface comic frame to advance misogynistic jokes on a regular basis as a member of the BBC's *Kentucky Minstrels* (Pickering [2008] 2016: 204–10). There is a curious historical paradox here. Compared with the viciousness of Reid's joke, Warren's anti-women jokes were fairly mild, yet whereas comic blackface entertainment is now widely regarded as ethically unacceptable, misogynistic jokes remain in broad circulation and are often far more virulent than in the early twentieth century. Two examples should suffice:

How many men does it take to open a beer? None—it should be opened by the time she brings it.

What do you say to a woman with two black eyes? Nothing—she's been told twice already.

In both of these repellent Q & A jokes (the first presuming female subservience, the second enjoining and endorsing domestic violence), it may seem that certain steps forward necessarily entail many more steps backwards.

Jokes can be refused for either aesthetic or ethical reasons, but in the latter case, when we openly engage with the ethical dimension of humor and comedy, we are liable to be confronted with the accusation of "political correctness." As we are so confronted, we are immediately pushed into a semantic quagmire, for the term "political correctness" is protean in meaning and application and for this reason generates considerable misrepresentation and confusion (Perry 1992).³ While the term is certainly vague and ever-shifting in sense and reference, there is at least one characteristic of it that is clear: it is not usually one with which anyone self-identifies. Instead, it is generally used to discredit other people, as is the case with stereotypes, even though these can on occasion be internalized because of certain social and moral pressures to conform to



FIGURE 8.2: Mike Reid, British comedian in 1975. Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

them. PC references are almost always accusatory, and are often made with reference to allegedly extremist others; again, as with stereotyping, its rhetorical meanings are self-serving. Extreme political correctness is actually quite rare and—at least in Britain—is to a large extent a mythical invention of a right-wing tabloid press specializing in the polarization of devils and angels, for both political and commercial reasons.

In relation to humor and comedy, it is an object of castigation leveled by those who regard the aesthetics of comedy as sacrosanct, and certainly very much at odds with ethical issues. “A joke’s a joke,” it is said, as if it could simply be *sui generis*, with no relation to or bearing on any other form of discourse and communication, and with no implication or consequence for any other form of social interaction or arrangement. “Just joking” provides the classic let-out clause for those who make and appreciate racist or sexist jokes, making it appear as if the ideological views and values underpinning them are redeemed by the jokes themselves. The British comedian Jimmy Carr offers an unabashed

example of this in declaring that “it doesn’t matter what I say. It’s not important. We can say anything as long as it gets a laugh” (Barkham 2006: 30). Claiming that “the great thing about comedy is that it’s not accountable” is then used to exonerate such Carr jokes as: “What’s the difference between football and rape? Women don’t like football” (Moss 2009: 7). The assumption underlying this joke would seem to be that, regardless of the violence involved, women are themselves responsible for being raped. They are alleged not to like football, even though many women do, and some play it at local, national, and international levels. If nevertheless this specious gender stereotype is accepted, and of course the joke depends upon this, the twisted logic upon which it turns is as follows: the difference between football and rape is threefold in that women naturally lust for sex, always incite it for that reason, and ergo enjoy being raped. If that is so, either they are themselves to blame for the crime of rape, or rather rape is not to be regarded as a crime, since it is what women crave, and because of this men are excused of any culpability in the act of rape. Men, after all, just like kicking a ball around and having a good laugh. To the extent that this assumption about gender and sexuality is accepted, it attaches blame to the victims of rape and severely diminishes the view of heterosexual rape as a serious social problem. It is a joke at the gross expense of women, making outdated reactionary assumptions about them, and it throws a single finger at the seriousness of rape as an act of violence. The countermove to this is to say, “hey, come on, you’re totally missing the point,” or less colloquially, “lighten up intellectually” and return to the appropriate discursive frame. With that we’re again swimming hard against a strong downstream current that claims that to consider such jokes in a serious manner is simply and forever misconceived.⁴

There are other variants of this exculpatory approach to humor and comedy, but they all more or less advance an understanding of comedy as intrinsically benign, a tonic for the soul and a welcome distraction from the world’s woes (Weaver 2011: 8–12). Reference to “political correctness gone mad” is then often an excuse for refusing to think about the ethical issues raised by antagonistic comedy, as if this is strictly beside the point.⁵ Such refusal may be convenient, but it is nevertheless an unwarranted sidestep around such issues, for comedians, as a fine example of this taxonomic category has put it, definitively have “a responsibility to themselves to consider the consequences of what they’re doing” (Herring 2011: 20). Comedians should, in other words, think carefully about what they say and do, just as both academic and media critics have a responsibility to develop an informed understanding of comedy and how it operates, so that, for instance, strongly reaffirming racist stereotypes in comic routines is clearly distinguished from a comedian exploring racist argument using the “age-old comedic device” of saying “the opposite of what you believe in order to demonstrate the ultimate stupidity of the stated position,

following it through to its illogical conclusion” (Herring 2009: 12). Once again, the aesthetics and ethics of humor and comedy need to exist in active dialog with each other if they are not to slide laterally into smug assurances of their own self-evidently important values.

Any moral position can of course be over-earnestly taken and any moral principle can be over-zealously applied, but it remains the case that “derogatory words make way for degrading treatment” and that “language is more than our basic tool of communication; it shapes perceptions and so influences behaviour” (Sardar 2008). Given that this is the case, if so-called political correctness is concerned with, for example, cases of the routine presence of upfront racism, and the indignities thereby suffered by the targeted ethnic group, what (apart from the specious “just joking” let-out clause) are the ethical grounds for objecting to this? Such concern cannot simply be swept aside as evidence of liberal claims to the moral high ground, though that is a common objection to it. Another common objection turns around the claim that unless offending others is recognized as an inalienable right, it will mean the end of joke-telling as we know it: “What really seems to worry people is the idea that they will no longer be able to express themselves freely, that they will always have to think twice before they say anything—that they will no longer be able to call a spade a spade or a woman a girl” (Moore 1994).

Thinking about the ethical implications of humor and comedy is definitely not equivalent to seeking censorship of what can be said in these forms of communication and discourse. *Inter alia*, it is instead concerned with thinking about the possible social and psychological consequences of a racist or sexist joke and how the targeted victim may feel about being identified in racist or sexist terms. If “political correctness” suggests that we should at least consider and discuss the values of dignity and respect, politeness and decorum, in everyday civic life, why should this excite such aggressive over-reaction, seeing it as if it is equivalent to banning the salutary taboo-breaking techniques of humor and comedy from all corners of the public sphere? Consider again Frank Lentricchia’s definition of the task of the critic, and place this in relation to how “political correctness” has improved the representation in popular comedy of the exploited, oppressed, and excluded. Without this improvement, the repeated jocular reference in early 2009 to a black tennis star as a golliwog by the daughter of a former British prime minister would not have backfired, the use of the “golly” in commodity branding would have continued, and white men may even have continued to routinely black-up in the name of light entertainment and comedy (Pickering 2013).

There are times when questions of appropriateness and decorum in comedy are given considerable attention and thought, as for example was the case in the United States during the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Many comedians were very cautious and inhibited in their attempts to respond to this atrocity.⁶ It is of

course readily understandable why such sensitivity and sense of propriety should be shown in the aftermath of events like 9/11, but it begs the question as to why they should be confined to such times. In fact, they are not, though here we need to distinguish between response to sudden catastrophic events and more gradual processes of attitudinal change, as for example with those occurring over the past half-century when it has, by slow but steady step, become considered highly objectionable to refer to certain categories of people as “darkies,” “poofs,” or “spastics.” If such references are now considered unacceptable, why did no one after 9/11 decry such ethical sensitivity with regard to comedy as “political correctness gone mad”? The question is of course



FIGURE 8.3: Stewart Lee. Teenage Cancer Trust Comedy Night on April 19, 2016 at the Royal Albert Hall, London. Picture by Julie Edwards / Alamy Stock Photo.

rhetorical, but it is asked in order to underline the point that the obsessive attacking of attempts to eliminate the expression of hurtful forms of prejudice and bigotry in public discourse can all too easily stymie progressive developments in civic and cultural life.⁷

In light of such advances in what is regarded as ethically unacceptable, it is surprising that few contemporary comedians feel able to express support and admiration for so-called political correctness. Richard Herring is one; his erstwhile partner in comedy, Stewart Lee, is another. Stewart Lee does not want to moralize or censor anyone, but he does regard it as welcome that the racist ridicule in popular comedy of the past is no longer possible, at least in mainstream media. He acknowledges that there can be problems with it, and that its negotiation of “a kind of formally inclusive language” is “often clumsy,” but entering into this negotiation is surely preferable to, for example, regarding the infamous “n” word as an acceptable appellation. He has used his on-stage acts to turn the tables on anti-PC critics, or those who excuse racism. So, for example, when the soccer manager Ron Atkinson ran into trouble for calling a black footballer “a lazy, thick nigger,” this was followed by the football commentator Jimmy Hill opining that “calling a black man a nigger is just a bit of harmless fun.” Hill qualified this by saying it was no more offensive to use this word than it would be to call him “Chinny” because he had a big chin. With enormous ease, Lee pointed to the gargantuan lack of any equivalence in the word “Chinny” to the “whole weight of cultural and historical significance” attached to the word “nigger”: “there were not vast swathes of humanity historically enslaved on the grounds that they had big chins” and “you don’t hear news reports saying ‘A man was beaten to death in Hull last night. The violence is thought to be chin-motivated’” (Lee 2010: 83–5).

The major concerted exception to lack of support for “political correctness” among comedians occurred in the “alternative comedy” of the 1980s. This was very much a negative reaction to the sexist and racist content of the material used to regale audiences in pub and club comedy of the 1960s and 1970s, delivered almost exclusively by white men (women figured instead as barmaids and strippers). It also turned away from the rapid-fire delivery, stock one-liners, catchphrases, and double entendres of straight stand-up comedy, and instead explored overtly social and political topics. Chief among its various achievements, “alt com” made people more aware of the choices and assessments to be made, along with the implications and repercussions of those choices, particularly where joke-structures are dependent on the identification of a butt or on impersonation of one kind or another.⁸ One such choice is whether, in drawing on the license “to explore aspects of life that are difficult, contradictory and distressing,” comedy is directed at those in positions of power and authority, or at those who are relatively powerless and in positions of social subordination (Dyer 1993: 114; Lockyer and Pickering 2008: 811). So, for example, in



FIGURE 8.4: Richard Herring talking at The Telegraph Ways With Words Literary Festival, Dartington Hall, 2010. Southwest UK Imaging / Alamy Stock Photo.

explaining why some potential targets are off-limits for himself, Alexei Sayle made abundantly clear which conscious ethical choice he had made: “The important thing about racism is *oppression*—I won’t do stuff about the Irish or women or blacks or Pakistanis because they are oppressed, and I don’t want to make that oppression any greater” (Ross 1998: 104). The choice between kicking up or kicking down is not necessarily either/or, but the consequences are radically different, especially where the comedic intention is ridicule and derision. A recent example of making the disadvantaged and powerless a target of comic abuse revolves around the British working-class “chav” stereotype.⁹

STEREOTYPES IN HUMOR AND COMEDY

The term “chav” is a relatively recent coinage, with the *Little Britain* character, Vicky Pollard, being one of the most notorious examples in British comedy of a female chav, but of course there are male versions too, with the same age/social class linking, in both comedy and other television genres.¹⁰ As the latest version of the long-established category of “undeserving” poor, the stereotype has acquired a broader application whereby its association with the category of youth may be lost, but its connection with social class is always strongly retained, with its ascribed traits and behavior patterns becoming indiscriminately

extended to all white working-class people. One aspect of this, and of the semantic flexibility of the term, is either that white working-class people in general are obscured or rendered invisible by the narrower Vicky Pollard-type association, or that at times whole working-class communities are perceived through the prism of chav-ness where this encompasses welfare dependence, excessive consumption of cheap alcohol, irrational belligerence, sexual promiscuity, single teenage mums, and excessively large families. Here are a few examples:

Q. What does a chav girl use as protection during sex?

A. A bus shelter.

Q. What do you call a thirty-year-old female chav?

A. Granny.

Q. Why did the chav cross the road?

A. To start a fight with a complete stranger for no reason whatsoever.

The “chav” stereotype in such jokes shows how stereotyping helps legitimate and justify social and economic inequalities by mocking the poor and in doing so attributing their disadvantaged position in the social structure to their own failings, and their lack of ambition and aspiration, rather than to the stratified social arrangements by which they are disadvantaged. “Blaming the poor” and regarding them as individually responsible for their own poverty is then ethically specious but politically expedient when it goes hand-in-hand with the removal of safety nets in the system of welfare and—contrary to the occasional generalized association of chav-ness with working-class people as a whole—the connection of these safety nets only to a working-class rump who are represented as feckless, rude, and recalcitrant. Supported by claims that Britain is a classless, meritocratic society, this occludes the difficulties class disadvantage can entail for those at the bottom of the social scale, deflects attention from the exploitation of people with only their labor to sell who are forced into poorly paid work in the service industries, and ignores the growth of precarious temporary or part-time employment in a gig economy where people can be hired or fired at will. Perhaps most of all, it disregards the huge social costs of deindustrialization, and more recently of the 2008 economic crisis and its manifold consequences. These are part of the wider historical context for the rise of the “chav” stereotype, which now encloses within its negativizing embrace professional scroungers who “breed for greed.” Disregard of questions of representativeness in the interests of media sensationalism and comedic pot-shots at the stereotype follows directly from making the ethical choice to hit downwards rather than upwards in humor and comedy, while the rhetorical effectiveness of connecting “something for nothing” with the working-class “chav” is its deflection of

attention from, say, the expenses scandal at Westminster, or corporate tax evasion on a scale far in excess of any figure associated with welfare dependency or fraud.

When the stereotype is presented within a joking frame, this may then seem to place any serious intent or consequence of the stereotype on hold, as well as making it more difficult to criticize on the grounds that “it’s only a joke,” as for example with the joke about a “chav” walking into a job center and being told that there was a job available “that’s just right for you . . . ten hours a week, 400 hundred thousand a year, no qualifications required.” The job-seeker asks if the clerk is joking and the clerk replies: “well, you started it.” Here the stock feature of the stereotype is both the source *and* object of the joke. The joke mocks the seriousness of the job-seeker’s intent and reinforces the attribution of being lazy and workshy, yet because this mini-story is told for comedic purposes, these may appear to be its main justification and not the stereotype on which it relies.

The joking frame makes the story seem an occasion intended only for “harmless fun.” It is then behind this facade of humor that it hardwires the stereotype even further into the social myths in which it is embedded. The effect is compounded by humor and comedy having come to be regarded, throughout the modern period, as unarguably a positive facet of social and cultural life, and so integral to people’s wellbeing and sustained integration in particular groups and communities. The power of this predominant and even at times fetishistic belief in the beneficent influence of humor and comedy is evidenced by the way it appears impregnable even in the face of jokes that clearly demean and derogate certain social categories in a stereotypical manner, as in those being discussed. That is why the ethical aspects of humor and comedy seem at times to be ruthlessly cast aside as irrelevant, or assumed to be hazardous to broach because to do so may create the impression that we are lacking in humor, a condition which may be seen or felt as a source of pity, condescension, self-inadequacy, or shame. So, for example, as a result of an inveterately feel-good approach to humor and comedy, women (of whatever social class) are placed in a double-bind when they are told sexist jokes, or when these are told in their company: “by laughing she supports a patriarchal system, but not laughing further decreases her social power and reveals her as someone with no sense of humor, or with at least a severe humor deficiency” (Bemiller and Schneider 2010: 463).

How, then, can we go about contesting the use of stereotypes in popular humor and comedy, and in that way more securely open up and soundly develop their ethical dimension? Sticking with the “chav” stereotype for now, it represents in many ways the negative obverse of an idealized middle-class self-conception. Its comedic function is not only to demean and belittle, but also to maintain and perpetuate unequal social relations through the rhetorical

distancing thereby constructed. By being given expression in a comic frame, the stereotype appears to be legitimated by the joke, and vice versa. It may be that those who are in the stereotyped category are regarded as deserving of comic ridicule and derision, but questions have at least been raised about the social consequences of such ridicule and derision. A second move toward developing firmer footings for discussion of the ethical aspects of comedy is the broader recognition that is now given of the extent to which ridicule and derision figure in both vernacular forms of humor and in professional genres of comedy. Here Michael Billig has made a significant contribution to critical humor studies by showing at considerable length how the orthodox view of humor's benign positivity fails to account for comic ridicule as a major source of humor (as is the case also with both incongruity theory and relief theory). He has argued that such humor and comedy act as a means of social discipline, instilling in us the prevailing codes of everyday conduct and reinforcing the existing social order. Not all humor and comedy can be validly interpreted in this way, but Billig has nevertheless added a vitally important perspective to our theoretical understanding of humor and comedy that enables us more effectively to counter their pervasive affirmative valuation.

If this move is mainly confined to the cultivation of critical analysis, another strategic response to comic stereotypes and the social myths they support is made in popular comedy itself. There are various ways in which stereotypes can be challenged in comedy, and it is worth mentioning at least a couple of them. The first is to use parody, imitation, mimicry, and exaggeration to loosen the hold of the stereotype and begin its semiotic unravelling. As Margaret Cho puts it: "What I do is I take a stereotype and I enlarge it to the point where it seems ridiculous" (Fraiberg 1994: 324). This technique is integral to her use of stand-up to critique the social issues surrounding ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. A good example of the comedic abrasion of stereotypes is the 1950s American television sitcom *I Love Lucy* (1951–7), which played with and disrupted the stereotype of the "true woman." It did so by deploying vaudeville techniques simultaneously to uphold and upset normative heterofemininity and "embody complex negotiations of gender and identity" (White 2016: 298; see also Mellencamp 1986).

The second is a more direct, but no less subtle strategic response, and this is the deployment of reverse discourse. The use of techniques of symbolic reversal by comedians can effectively challenge entrenched stereotypes and subvert their conventional meaning. Such humor adopts the semiotic devices and structures of racist or sexist humor but seeks to turn the tables on its conventional meanings and claims to truth. The television sitcom *Goodness Gracious Me*, which ran on the BBC 2 television channel from 1998 to 2001, played with and neatly upended various Indian stereotypes, using comic reversal to confound white British assumptions or switch roles, as in their classic "Going for an

English” sketch, in which one of the characters enters a restaurant and asks for “something really bland.”¹¹ This acts very much in contrast with a joke that merely confirms an existing stereotype, as in this example from Jerry Sadowitz: “What do you say to a Pakistani at Christmas? Twenty Benson and Hedges and a pint of milk” (Gibb 1997: 7). While it is the case that Asian families in Britain often run corner shops, the discursive subversion of an anticipated seasonal greeting acts only to confirm this as a stereotype of Asian families in general, so ignoring the many other valuable occupations taken up by Asian people the world over.¹²

Using reverse discourse to destabilize stereotypes may backfire when comic ambiguity is interpreted in a direction alternative to the overt intention, and when successful may only be short-lived. Attempts to disrupt stereotypes in humor and comedy may also fail because they both play *on* and play *off* earlier notions and preconceptions, as in the following example:

A man asks, “God, why did you make woman so beautiful?” God responds, “so you would love her.” The man asks: “But God, why did you make her so dumb?” God replied: “So she would love you.”

Here the intended derision of male vanity is only realized by simultaneously reaffirming the long-established yet erstwhile contrast between male and female intelligence. The direction of the joke is then fatally divided despite this reaffirmation standing in plain view of the severe diminution of the stereotype in many parts of the world.

Although one should not overlook the resilience of stereotypes once they have become entrenched, not least because they function as forms of symbolic boundary maintenance, in both a sociological and psychological sense, reverse discourse is nevertheless one of the most effective counter-hegemonic strategies in comedy. A celebrated example of what could be called double reversal in comedy involved the Australian comedian Aamer Rahman, responding to his telling jokes about white people onstage being denounced as “reverse racism.” His counter to this was to develop a counterfactual routine whereby he imagines what would have had to happen historically to make the accusation valid. In a deadpan manner, he says he would have to climb into a time machine, and persuade the leaders of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to invade and colonize Europe. He would have to “ruin Europe over a couple of centuries so all their descendants would want to migrate to where black and brown people come from.” He would also have to construct social systems that privileged black and brown people, while from time to time bombing white people’s countries, and “saying it’s for their own good because their culture’s inferior.” The YouTube video of this has been watched over two million times.¹³

CONCLUSION

In the course of this chapter, we have seen that popular comedy can unite and divide, include and exclude, contribute to identity formation and maintenance, and facilitate processes of “othering” in symbolically demarcating certain social groups from one’s own. An obvious deduction from this—though peculiarly one rarely taken—is that humor and comedy are not together an absolute good, and it is at least in part because of this that we recognize their ethical dimension in the content of what they express, the contexts in which they occur, and the categories of people who are their butts. In endeavoring to demonstrate that discussion of this dimension is far from foolish, I have tried to make clear that the butts and targets of comedy often have less power and prestige than their chief perpetrators and auditors. Jokes about them appear to confirm their inferiority and affirm the social divisions separating them from those who tell them and appreciate them. Along with the political aspects of this we should remember that in these appearances a choice has been made concerning the comic butt, and this choice has ethical implications.

It is better to approach the ethics of comedy in this way rather than solely in relation to the vexed question of offensiveness. Offensiveness exists in many forms, and can certainly be inimical, but being offended is, at least in some cases, subjectively oriented, and for that reason possibly misperceived or misconceived; the grounds on which it is claimed are at times complicated and contestable; and when what is deeply hurtful to one person is lightly laughed off by another, we hardly have a sound basis for thinking about humor’s ethical dimension. Making ethical issues a key element of critical humor studies takes us to firmer ground because it raises shared concerns centered around questions of intention, significance, context, and consequence—whether intended or not—especially, but of course not only, in relation to antagonistic comedy. Where antagonistic comedy is in the analytical frame, such issues are inseparable from its ideological content—its racism, say, maybe its homophobia—or if it is critically parodic or satirical in intent, its manner of assault on power, privilege, and social elitism.

If humor and comedy are not together an absolute good, neither are they to be regarded as isolated from the rest of what happens in the world. Intervals of laughter in our lives are not without connection to our lives simply because of being intervals. While we always need to look into the distinctive semiotic, stylistic, and aesthetic features of such intervals, both situated and mediated forms of humor and mirth are such a ubiquitous and integrated part of social and cultural life that they cannot be taken as utterly unlike any other part of such life. By the same token, they cannot be considered as ethically unaccountable, a realm of interaction and discourse apart from any other. Antagonistic humor and comedy should be discussed alongside similar processes and practices of “othering,” for it is not as if, say, jokes reliant on racist

stereotypes belong to an entirely separate corpus of ideas, attitudes, and values to racist ideology more broadly. To argue otherwise is to indulge in comedy fetishism, the term here being a deliberate play on a classic Marxist concept precisely because of its similar occlusive effects. Humor and comedy are to be celebrated, but not hallowed above all other discursive forms of human communication. The argument pursued throughout this chapter is that we should not give automatic approval to the sanctity of comic license outside of those other forms, and we should not capitulate so readily to the facile jokes-allow-us-to-say-anything apologia for antagonistic humor. If we do, the ethical dimension of comedy is left painted into a singularly awkward corner.

The all-too-convenient self-image of the comedian as a taboo-breaker and convention-buster creates a double-bind for those who then object to aggressive or violent jokes or oppressive forms of comic stereotyping: express your objection and you are intolerant; keep quiet and you fall into the trap of what the media historian and social theorist John Durham Peters calls homeopathic machismo: “the daily imbibing of poisons in small doses so that large draughts will not hurt” (2005: 6). As Nietzsche speciously put it, what does not kill us, makes us stronger. The double-bind confines us to such delimited alternatives as moral illiberalism and liberal self-righteousness. Neither are desirable or satisfactory even though at times we may all be inclined toward either position. As I have argued throughout the chapter, we have to maneuver around this double-bind by keeping the aesthetics and ethics of comedy in dialog with each other. This entails that we flexibly understand on the one side that “*levitas* and joking are ethical matters” and on the other that because they can transcend such matters, vibrant and tolerant forms of cultural life and open and durable forms of social democracy need “both Stoic listening and Dadaist rowdiness, community-minded neighbourliness and irrepressible resistance” (Peters 2005: 274). Intelligence and good sense without folly and frivolity lead to either piety or disillusionment. We need to subject the “just joking” stance to greater critical scrutiny, and we need to keep laughing at both what is foolish and absurd, difficult and distressing in all of what “we” and “they” say and do. We need to celebrate humor and comedy as essential components of social and cultural life, and at the same time ask questions about their possible contribution to processes of inferiorization, conditions of marginalization, states of inequality, and links with physical violence. These should always be open questions, with no fixed answers, but there is no good reason why they should not be raised for any form of expression and communication, comedy included. Above all else, we need to accept that attempting empathically to perceive racist or sexist jokes from the perspective of the target group member who experiences them and is affected by them is, in the end, quite compatible with enjoying the carnivalesque intervals in our lives and, above all, reveling in laughter as a declaration that life is indubitably worth living.¹⁴

NOTES

Series Preface

1. Umberto Eco ([1980] 1995), “The Comic and the Rule,” in *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, 269–78, trans. William Weaver, London: Minerva.

Introduction

1. In the UK, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* did not begin airing until 1958 and ran until accusations of racism forced it to close in 1978.
2. Hangout sitcoms focus on a cast of friends rather than featuring a family or workplace.
3. The first Asian American sitcom was *All-American Girl* (1994) starring Margaret Cho.
4. Madison Square Gardens in New York has a capacity of 19,000. The O2 Arena in London seats 20,000.

Chapter Three

1. The British Stand-Up Comedy Archive was established at the University of Kent in 2013 to preserve and provide access to archives and records relating to British stand-up.
2. The David Drummond Collection is an archive of mid-twentieth century comedy scripts held in the University of Kent’s Special Collections and Archives.

Chapter Four

1. Roseanne tweeted: “muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby=vj.” See Koblin 2018a.

2. Roseanne wrote, "I apologize to Valerie Jarrett and to all Americans . . . I am truly sorry for making a bad joke about her politics and her looks. I should have known better. Forgive me—my joke was in bad taste." See Koblin 2018a.
3. The exception is, of course, members of marginalized groups targeting their own group. For discussion of in-group/out-group distinctions, see *Performing Marginality* (Gilbert 2004).
4. See Gilbert 2004 for a discussion of unique characteristics of humor as a discursive form.
5. See Gilbert 2004 for a more extensive discussion of humor as an "anti-rhetoric."
6. See Gilbert 2004 for more on the process of both identification and "dis-identification."
7. See Gilbert 2004 for an extensive discussion of the historical tradition of fools.
8. See Gilbert 2004 for discussion of all five postures.
9. For extensive discussion of Sarah Silverman, see Gilbert 2018.
10. Coined by notorious anti-feminist, Laura Sessions Stepp, the phrase "gray rape" has been used to discredit victim/survivors; see Valenti 2010: 161–2.
11. In the same interview, Schumer explains: "Once I realized I was running the risk of people laughing for the wrong reasons, then I—I completely changed my tune. My performance would be a little affected, and sort of [in high, Valley Girl voice] talking different and then delivering my punchlines like—like a bubbly fool. I don't feel like I need to, ya know, dress like a 'real housewife' at a reunion anymore."
12. Dick Jokes are commonly defined as jokes containing explicit sexual or scatological content.
13. SelphieFairy, YouTube (2011).
14. In the context of YouTube comments, congruence between gender identity and commentator name (and photo, if one is posted) is assumed.
15. For discussion of misogynistic YouTube comments targeting Sykes in the context of pushback against high-profile feminists, see Gilbert 2015.
16. For an extended discussion of the difference between victims and butts, see Gilbert 2004.
17. *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–19), Awards. IMDb. Available online: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0898266/awards> (accessed August 13, 2019).
18. Kimmel describes Guyland as both a cultural space populated exclusively by males, and a time of life, generally ages 16–26. He notes that this period is also referred to by sociologists as "adulthood" (2008: 25).
19. Additional male comedic postures may be useful as well. See *Performing Marginality* for discussion of five male comedic postures: Kid, Stud, Rebel, Loser, and Reporter.
20. *Modern Family*, available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_Family (accessed August 15, 2019).
21. *Modern Family*, available online: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1442437/awards> (accessed August 13, 2019). See also Almendraia 2011.
22. According to Koblin 2018a, after Roseanne's initial tweet, the manufacturer of the sleep aid, Ambien noted, "Racism is not a known side effect."

Chapter Five

1. The hearing-impaired waitress appears in a sketch “Two Soups” and Mrs Overall is a character in a recurrent sketch “Acorn Antiques,” both from Victoria Woods’ *As Seen on TV* (BBC 2 1985–7). Petula Gordini is the mother of Brenda, the main character in Woods’ sitcom, *Dinnerladies* (BBC 1 1998–2000).
2. The *Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* ran from 1957 to 1960 as a series of one-hour specials following on from the hit show *I Love Lucy*, which ran from 1951 to 1957 on CBS. Both shows starred Lucille Ball and her then-husband Desi Arnaz.
3. *Sunday Night at the Palladium* ran from 1955 to 1969. In 1961, one iteration of the show was hit by an Equity strike. The show was saved by Wisdom and Forsythe, both of whom were members of the Variety Artists Federation, were exempt from the strike, and carried the show between them.

Chapter Eight

1. For reasons of space, both example and analysis in the chapter are devoted to comic discourse in written and spoken forms, but comedy is of course not confined to such forms. For an interesting recent collection addressing visual humor in relation to racism, nationality, and ethnicity, see Rosenthal 2015.
2. See the special issue of *Humor* (4:2 1991) edited by Avner Ziv and dealing specifically with Jewish humor.
3. As well as Ruth Perry’s review of the changing meanings of the term, see also Dunant 1994, Williams 1995, Wilson 1995, and Hughes 2009.
4. Carr’s general “just joking” stance is in fact contradicted in at least two cases: his admission that he felt “terrible” about having offended injured soldiers with a joke about the Paralympics, and the unreserved apology issued by the BBC after broadcasting the following Carr joke: “The male gypsy moth can smell the female gypsy moth up to seven miles away—and that fact also works if you remove the word ‘moth’” (Sweney 2016).
5. If political correctness has indeed “gone mad,” there would not be such an abundance of, and ease of access to, often virulent racist and sexist jokes on the internet. For an extensive study of comic racist discourse on the website *Sickipedia*, see Cotter 2014.
6. For more extensive treatment of the uses of humor in popular culture during the longer aftermath of 9/11, see Achter 2008 and Gournelos and Greene 2011.
7. For the distinction between prejudice and bigotry, see Pickering 2004a.
8. For extended discussion of alternative comedy and political correctness, see Wilmut and Rosengard 1989, Double 1997, and Pickering and Littlewood 1998.
9. I have written extensively about stereotyping in general elsewhere. In this chapter (as in Pickering 2014), I am concerned primarily with the occurrence of stereotyping in humor and comedy, but for broader discussion see, for example, Pickering 2001, 2004b, and 2004c.
10. For more on *Little Britain* in general and Vicky Pollard in particular, see the fine collection of essays edited by Sharon Lockyer (2010), and for the best study of chavs to date, see Jones 2012.

11. See Gillespie 1999 for further discussion of this TV series.
12. For a more developed discussion of reverse discourse in both Asian and black comic performance, see Weaver 2011, chapters 5 and 6.
13. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=aamer+rahman+reverse+racism.
14. Laughter as a declaration that life is indubitably worth living is adapted from Seán O'Casey 1956: 226.

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INDEX

- abjection 117, 120
- Abbot and Costello 7, 75
- adorkable misogyny 103–4
- Adorno, Theodor 44, 54, 55, 156–7
- Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, The* 35
- aesthetics of comedy 39, 177–8, 183, 185, 194
- Afrika Bambaataa 141
- agelast* 49
- agon* 45–6
- alazon* 46, 49
- America's Funniest Home Videos* 40
- Andersen, Kurt 148
- Andy 'N' Amos* 10, 12
- antisemitism 180
- anxious displacement 109
- Aristophanes 12, 45–6, 48–9, 50, 53
- Aristotle 46, 50, 59
- Atkinson, Ron 187
- Attic drama 44
- Auslander, Philip 84
- Ayckbourn, Alan 9, 56
- Aykroyd, Dan 148
- Bainbridge, Beryl 65
- Bakhtin, Mikhail 44, 50–3, 55, 59, 62, 110, 127
 - official culture 51–2
- Baldwin, Alec 145
- Ball, Lucille 57, 197
- I Love Lucy* 34, 57, 191, 197
- Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour, The* 120–1, 197
- Bambara, Toni Cade 54
- Barber, C.L. 43, 46–7, 50, 56, 58
- Barnes, Angela 79, 85
- Barr, Roseanne 87–8, 91, 94, 109–10
- Bataille, Georges 62
- Baumgartner, Jody C. 148
- bawd 91–4, 96–7, 99–100, 103, 106, 196
- Bee, Samantha 144
- Belushi, John 145
- Bentley, Eric 44, 60–1, 163–4
- Bergson, Henri 44, 55, 59, 90, 161–2
- Berlant, Lauren 60
- Bevis, Matthew 51, 163
- Big Bang Theory, The* 88, 97–104, 106, 109
- Billig, Michael 157, 169, 180, 191
- bitch 90–2, 94, 96–7, 99–100, 103, 106, 196
- Blake, Meredith 142
- Blair, Tony 133, 140
- body, the xiii, 5, 50, 51–3, 62, 93, 111–29, 151–4, 157–8, 160, 162, 170
- Borat* 8
- Brecht, Bertolt 46, 55
- Bridesmaids* 113, 120, 129
- British Stand-Up Comedy Archive (BSUCA) 64, 70, 72, 84
- Bruce, Lenny 69, 72–3, 84, 90, 110

- buffoon 58, 98, 101–3, 106–7, 144
 burlesque 65–6, 73, 76
 Bush, George H.W. 140
 Bush, George W. 133, 139–40
 Butlins 179
- Cambridge ritualists 45–6, 50
Candidate, The 135–8, 148
 Capaldi, Peter 132
 Capra, Frank 6, 55, 135–6
 Carlson, Susan 55–8
 carnival 50–2, 62, 110
 carnivalesque 44, 51, 55, 89, 110, 160, 194
 Carr, Jimmy 183–4, 197
 Carrey, Jim 113–14
Carry On films 28
 Carter, Angela 51
 Carter, Jimmy 148
 cartoons 54, 163, 166–8
 Carvey, Dana 148
Catherine Tate Show 119
 Chaplin, Charles 2, 5–6, 15, 25–6, 53, 111, 113–14, 121, 123, 162
 Chappelle, Dave 17, 139–42, 148
 Charney, Maurice 44, 52–3, 56, 59
 Chase, Chevy 148
 “chavs” 188–90
 Cho, Margaret 191, 195
 Che, Michael 17
 Christie, Bridget 78, 86
 circus 112, 114, 121
 Cixous, Hélène 62, 159
 classical Hollywood cinema 4, 24–6, 34, 48, 55, 116, 168
 classism 176
 Cleese, John 115, 117
 Clinton, Bill 148
 Clinton, Hillary 145–6
 Coates, Ta-Nehisi 141–2
 Colbert, Stephen 93, 144, 146
Comedians, The (TV series) 182
 comedian 2, 10, 16, 18, 20–1, 24–6, 31–2, 34, 39–40, 64–86, 90–7, 112, 143, 163, 175, 177, 180–8, 191–4
 comedy drama 11, 32
 comic butt 49, 52–3, 56–7, 93, 98, 102, 104, 109, 159, 187, 193, 196
 comic frame 88–9, 118–19
 comic personae 90–1, 94, 96–7, 103, 110, 175
- community 14, 19, 48, 57, 89
 Complicité (Théâtre de Complicité) 164
 Congreve, William 56–7
 Conti, Nina 82–3
 Conway, Kellyanne 146
 Cook, A.B. 45
 Cooper, Anderson 146
 Cooper, Tommy 178
 Cornford, Francis McDonald 43, 45–6, 48, 50, 52, 56
Cosby Show, The 15, 36
 costume 107, 119–20, 123–7
 Cousins, Norman 151
 Crockett, Steven A. 141
 cross-dressing 16, 123–7
 Cukor, George 48
- Daily Show, The* 20, 36, 144
Dark Knight, The 167
 De la Tour, Andy 76
 death 90, 118–19, 160
Death of Stalin, The 135
 Derrida, Jacques 62
 Desmonde, Jerry 75, 83
 disabilism 176
 disguise 9, 112, 123–8
 Dodd, Ken 79, 85
Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to stop Worrying and Love the Bomb 6, 131
Duck Soup 166
- ego psychology 60–1
eiron 49, 57
élan vital 59
 Ellison, Ralph 54
 empathy 55, 120
 epic theatre 55
 ethics 60, 173–93
 exaggeration 7–9, 14, 51, 97, 102, 107, 113, 115, 117–21, 124, 126, 140, 167, 191
 excess 38, 50, 52, 113, 118, 121, 126–7, 165
- Facebook 1, 2, 20, 40, 85, 135
 farce 52, 61, 126, 128, 164
Fawlty Towers 167
 feast 45–7
 feminism 57, 92, 98, 108, 182
 Ferrell, Will 148

- festive comedy 46–7, 52
 Fey, Tina 145
 Field, Sid 75, 77, 83
 Fields, Gracie 58, 74–5, 78
 Fo, Dario 77
 folk culture 50–1, 160
 fool-makers 89
 Forsyth, Bruce 121–3
Fortune 66, 73
Four Weddings and a Funeral 29
 Frazer, James 43, 45–6
 Freud, Sigmund 44, 52, 58–60, 90
Friends 33–4
Frost Report, The 115
 Frye, Northrop 44, 48–50, 52, 56
Full Frontal with Samantha Bee 144
 fun-killer 97, 99–103, 106–7
- Gadamer, Han-Georg 177
 game show 11, 30, 32
 games 73, 85, 177
 Gates, Henry Louis, Jr 44, 53, 54
 genre 7, 10, 26–8, 31–2, 34, 38, 45, 48, 50, 52, 61–2, 160, 165, 179
 Gervais, Matthew and David Sloan Wilson 151, 154–5
 Goldsmith, Stuart 84–5
Goodness Gracious Me 16, 191
Goon Show, The 11, 30
 Granville, Charlie 80
 Gray, Frances 55–8, 153
 grin face 155
 “gross-out” comedy 52, 120, 129
 grotesque realism (Bakhtin) 51–2
 Gurewitch, Morton 44, 52–3, 59–60
- Hancock’s Half-Hour* 11, 31
 HBO 12, 18, 36, 94–5, 133, 144
 Hans Wurst 58
 Hardy, Oliver 166
 Harrison, Jane Ellen 45
Have I Got News For You 38
Head of State 135, 138–40, 148
 Herring, Richard 184–5, 187–8
 Hill, Harry 70
 Hill, Jimmy 187
Hitch-Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, The 32
 Hokenson, Jan Walsh 43, 49
 Holocaust 181
 homodomesticity 108
- Hot Fuzz* 7, 118–19, 129
 Houghton, Tom 76, 78, 80, 84
 humor
 functions 11, 27, 29, 31, 35, 49, 89–90, 150, 154–6
 theories 89–90
 Hurston, Zora Neale 54
 Hussein, Saddam 140
- Iannucci, Armando 6, 132–3, 135
 improvization 65, 66, 68, 69, 73, 80–2
 Ince, Robin 72, 74
In the Loop 6, 132–4, 139, 148
 incongruity 19, 44, 59, 72, 89, 91, 100, 127, 167, 191
In the Club 9, 128
Interview, The 6, 8
It 146
 Iverson, Allen 139
I’m Sorry I Haven’t a Clue 31
ITMA 11, 31
- Johnny English* 7, 29
 jokes
 buying jokes 67
 content 8
 development 74, 79–80
 misogynistic 182–3, 190
 mother-in-law 16, 179
 on Twitter 19, 20, 85, 88
 joke-work 59
 Jones, Chris 145–6
 Jones, Terry 126, 129
 Johnstone, Keith 80
Just a Minute 11, 31
- Kaplan, Myq 78
 Keaton, Buster 1, 4, 5, 6, 25, 111, 113, 114–16
 Keith-Spiegel, Patricia 150–1
 Key and Peele 142–3, 148
 killjoys 49, 53
 Kozintsev, Alexander 152, 166
 Ku Klux Klan 180
 Kundera, Milan 156, 159
 Kris, Ernst 44, 60
- Lacan, Jacques 43, 60–2
 Lane, Lupino 77
 Langer, Susanne 58–60, 163

- Larner, Jeremy 137
Last Week Tonight 36, 144
Late Show with David Letterman 38
Late Show with Stephen Colbert, The 93, 144
 laughter
 as attachment behavior 155
 “dark laughter” 167
 and digital culture 168–70
 Duchenne and Non-Duchenne 154–5, 165, 169, 170
 empirical study 149–5, 152, 156, 171
 evolutionary theory 156
 good and evil 156–7
 jouissance and resistance 61, 62, 158–60
 as liberation 157–8
 philosophical thought 171
 physical description 149–51
 psychological benefits 150–51
 Laurel, Stan 1, 165
 Laurel and Hardy 165–6
 Leclerc, Annie 159
 Ledger, Heath 167
 Lee, Stewart 73–4, 186–7
 Lentricchia, Frank 179, 185
 Levin, Harry 49
 licence 160
 Lichtenberg, Georg Christoph 58
 Lichter, S. Robert 148
Little Britain 11, 127, 188–9
 Livingstone, Tom 80
 Lloyd, Harold 25, 114
 Lloyd, Marie 58
 Long, Josie 70–2
 Lord Chamberlain’s Office 68, 70, 72, 75
 Louis-Dreyfus, Julia 134
 love 6, 26–7, 47, 49, 61
 Low, Hite, and Stanley 115

 McCarthy, Melissa 120, 125, 145–6
 McGhie, Jimmy 63–5, 76–8, 80, 83, 86
 McKinnon, Kate 145–6
 Manning, Barnard 180–2
 Margolis, Jonathan 180–1
 marriage 26–7, 45–6, 56
Mary Poppins 158
 Marx, Harpo 166–7
 Marxist criticism 44, 54, 55
 mass culture 44, 54–5

Meet John Doe 135–6
 memes 18–19
 Menander 49
 Michaels, Lorne 145
 Miller, Jonathan 15, 153, 169, 178
 Millican, Sarah 79–80
 Misrule (Lord of) 47–8
Modern Family 88, 97, 104–9
 Molière 59, 61
 Molineux, Christopher 84
 monkey tales 53–4
 Monroe, D.H 149
 Monroe, Marilyn 57
 Monty Python 16, 112, 125–6
 Morreall, John 44, 59–60, 154, 156
 Morris, Jonathan S. 148
 mother-in-law jokes 16, 179
Mr. Bean 113, 129
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington 135–6, 148
Mrs. Doubtfire 124–5
 Murphy, Eddie 145
 Murray, Gilbert 45
 music hall 55, 65, 67–8, 77, 111, 112, 115, 161
 mythos 45–50

 9/11 185–6, 197
 narrative 25–7, 29–30, 32–5, 50, 126
 Netflix 1, 2, 34
 New Comedy 49, 59
 Ngai, Sianne 60
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 61, 194
 Nikulin, Dmitri 60
 Noise Next Door, The 73, 77, 80–2, 85

 Obama, Barack 87, 138, 139, 141–4, 146–7
Oedipus 49, 61
 offense 6, 8, 20–1, 37
 O’Gorman, Dave and Joe 68, 70
 Okeh Laughing Record, The 162
 Old Comedy 45–6, 48
 Old Rope 79
 Oliver, John 144
 Olsen and Johnson 67–8, 70
 Olson, Elder 45
 Orben, Robert 66–7, 77, 84–5
 Outkast 141

- Pacelli, Sam 73, 77, 80–2, 85
 Palin, Sarah 145
 panel show 10–11, 30, 38
 Pan'kov, Nikolai 51
parabasis 45–6, 55
 Parker, Trey 144
 Parvulescu, Anna 45, 154, 168
 parody 7–8, 16, 19, 27–8, 50, 144, 147, 191
 Peele, Jordan 142–3
 Pence, Mike 145, 147
 Perkins, Geoffrey 32
 Peters, John Durham 194
 Plato 59–60
 Plautus 49, 61
 play face 156
 playboys 49
 “pleasure industry” 156
 Plessner, Helmut 153–4, 158
 plot 5, 8, 11, 35, 45–6, 48–50, 56, 112, 160–1
 podcast 32, 65
 political correctness 3, 175, 182–7, 197
 politics 2, 3, 6, 16, 27, 36, 39, 54, 87, 131–48
 popular culture 16, 104, 158, 174–5, 179, 197
 populist theories 44
 postmodernism 51, 164
 Provine, Robert R. 151–3, 155
 psychoanalysis 49, 58–61
 public service broadcasting 37
 public sphere 37, 88, 185
 Punch and Judy 46

Question of Silence, A 160
Question of Sport, A 38

 Rabelais, Francois 44, 50–1
 racism 147, 185, 187–8, 192–3, 195, 197
 radio 1, 3–4, 10–13, 29–34, 38–40
 Rahman, Aamer 192, 198
 rape jokes 92, 95–7
 Ray, Ted 67
 Reagan, Ronald 139
 Redford, Robert 137
 Reed, Ishmael 54
 rehearsal 63, 75–9
 Reid, Beryl 68, 70
 Reid, Mike 182–3

 relief 44, 59–60, 90, 165, 191
 Ritchie, Michael 6, 135
 ritual 43, 45–8, 50, 52, 53, 56
 Rock, Chris 135, 138, 145
 rolodexing 81–2
 romantic comedy 6–7, 27, 47
 Romney, Mitt 143
Root, The 141
 Rushdie, Salman 51

 sacrifice 45–6, 98
 Sadowitz, Jerry 192
 Sahl, Mort 69
 Saper, Bernard 177
 satire 8, 16, 36, 46, 131–5, 145–8
Saturday Night Live 17, 125, 145–8
 Saturnalia 47
 Sayle, Alexei 189
 Scales, Prunella 167
 scatology 51–2
 Schumer, Amy 88, 91–4, 95, 97, 196
 screwball comedy 6, 27
 scripts 66–75
 Sessions, Jeff 146
 sexism 103, 106, 176, 183, 185, 187, 190, 191, 194, 197
 silent film 1, 5, 6, 29, 114–15, 129
Single Parents 14–15
 sitcom 1, 3, 10–15, 20, 30–1, 38–9, 56, 60, 87–8, 112, 120–1, 191–2, 195, 197
 family 105–9
 gender 36, 97–104, 191
 narrative 33–6
 race 14–15, 36, 191–2
 sexuality 13–14, 108–9
 types 11
 sketch show 1, 3, 10–12, 15–18, 38, 75, 112, 115, 117, 119, 126–7, 139–40, 145–8
 skill 1, 5, 18, 25–6, 34, 57, 81–2, 112–1, 123, 175
 slapstick 5, 111, 113–15, 117–18
 slave (Roman comedy) 60
 Smith, Linda 72, 84
 sociology of culture 175
South Park 144
 Spicer, Sean 125, 145–6
 Stallybrass, Peter 52, 110
 stand-up comedy 1–2, 16–18, 91–7, 180–5

- development 63–4, 78–80
- gender 56, 58, 95
- persona 90–4, 97
- rehearsal 76–78
- scripts 67–74
- stereotypes 57, 91, 100, 124, 141–2, 175, 184, 188–94
- Stevenson, Adlai 132
- Stewart, James 48, 135–6
- Stewart, Jon 20, 144
- Sullivan's Travels* 168
- Sunday Night at the London Palladium* 68–9, 121–3
- superiority 44, 59, 62, 90, 104
- Stott, Andrew 62
- Suits, Bernard 61
- Sykes, Wanda 91, 94–7, 196
- Terence 49, 60
- Thick of it, The* 132–3
- This is Spinal Tap* 8
- Tich, Little 67, 75, 78
- Tonight Show with Jay Leno, The* 38
- Torrance, Robert M 44, 52–4, 56, 59, 61
- tragedy 12, 43, 46, 48
- trickster 26, 44, 53
- Trump, Donald 139, 141, 144–8
- Twitter 1, 2, 19–20, 40–1, 85, 147
- unlaughter 169
- US Supreme Court 25
- vaudeville 10, 18, 115, 161, 191
 - impact on radio 30–4
- Veep* 132–5, 148
- victims 93, 96, 98, 104, 109–10, 117, 181, 184–5, 196
- vitalism 59
- Wallace, David Foster 51
- Walters, Julie 119
- Warren, Denier 182
- Waters, John 52
- White, Allon 191
- Wilde, Oscar 46
- Will and Grace* 13–14
- Williams, Robert 177
- Winterson, Jeanette 51
- Wisdom, Norman 121–3, 197
- wish-fulfilment 138
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 61
- Wizard of Oz, The* 131
- Wood, Victoria 58, 119, 197
- Wolfe, Ronald 68
- Wright, Richard 54
- You Can't Spell America Without Me* 148
- YouTube 1, 18–19, 39–40, 65, 88, 95–6, 169–70, 192
- You've Been Framed* 40
- Zinoman, Jason 78–9, 86
- Zupančič, Alenka 44, 60–2

